

# Realm of One



by  
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## **Realm of One**

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## **Prologue – The Middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Towards the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, long periods of drought had wreaked havoc on the entire continents. It was an economic strategy, planned and implemented by the Middle Kingdom, that had let loose a drought across North America, and other regions of the world.

The massive disruption of the global weather systems was brought on by the rapid and unfettered industrialization in the Middle Kingdom in Asia and by their over exploitation of carbon and mineral resources fed to them from throughout the world.

The smog and soot released into the atmosphere by the factories and power houses of the Middle Kingdom had served as precipitation condensation seeds, which unleashed constant storms which engulfed the entire North Pacific. The Middle Kingdom's smog and soot was sown to the wind, and the rest of the world had reaped the whirlwind – drought!

The Great Pacific typhoons which began in 2020 never made it to land but let loose their precipitation over the North Pacific from the tiny, now all but desolate islands off the Middle Kingdom all the way to 2/3rds of the distance across that great ocean. There along a north-south line the rains stopped and the oceans heated. There the skies were always blue and free of clouds.

This north-south high line produced an immobile high pressure front that pushed moist air away from the North American continent and back to the west feeding the storms in the North Pacific.

As a result of this immobile and impenetrable front, no rain found its way over land and in a few short years the lack of precipitation had turned massive tracts of once fertile land in North America into barren desert. With time, as the rains fell in the North Pacific, large tracts of the Indian subcontinent also dried and died off and war had ensued. A large swath of land was made inhabitable and many millions perished.

The Middle Kingdom itself was pushed east and forced to cling greedily to the coastal reaches and spill over onto the continental shelf. By their appetite for wealth and power the Middle Kingdom Mandarins had gone on to make war with their neighbours to the north, east, south and west, laying waste to the surrounding Pacific territories. Millions had died.

The arid western reaches of the Middle Kingdom then stopped the movement of moist air from moving east, and the rains came to the great northern Eurasian expanses. The entire Siberian expanse became an inland sea as a deluge of biblical proportions fell from the sky for years on end.

The European sub-continent remained the only fertile region that was weathering the inclement changes. But the number of people seeking sanctuary there soon exceeded the carrying capacity of the region and a series of brief and ruthless uncivil wars had ensued. Many millions perished or were pushed back into the desolation.

The areas worst affected by the soot and smog of the Middle Kingdom was the Northern Region of the Americas. Dry winds began to blow by the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By 2025 the once fertile wheat fields of the Americas, had dried up. Then the forests had died and entire river systems became clogged with creeping dust and sand.

In less than a dozen years, the once prosperous bread-basket of the world, the Midwest and the great prairies of North America, shrivelled away. The land had been inexorably turned into one of the world's largest desert. Each year it continued to grow.

While population in the Middle Kingdom remained stable, on the other side of the world, by 2050, half the population of North America had died of disease, starvation and uncivil violence. Millions more had died of thirst. This dystopia quickly led to food riots, and the Great Coup of 2073.

With the Great Coup the last of the Grand ideals of Democracy in the Americas had perished. By 2075 those still living in North America, struggling to survive the hunger and the thirst, envied those who had already died. There were only a handful of individuals who had the strength and the character to weather this catastrophe.

This is the story of one of them

## **Chapter One – All Alone in the Desert**

The crescent moon was big and bright this night. The land was arid, desolate and prehistoric. The air was stagnant and hot. The moon shimmered in the midnight heat. This corner of hell had not seen rain for many years.

One could not know from the blowing sand that great fields of wheat that once went to the horizon in all directions once grew here. Surveying the landscape, the rolling dunes ran out in all directions for as far as the eye could see. These sombre surroundings had the smell and feel of a wasteland.

In the middle of the night a violent west wind had descended upon the parched earth. Imperceptible at first, the wind gradually grew swiftly in intensity. There was nothing to hold it back. Moment by moment, as it pushed aside the cooler moister air, the desert wind gathered strength until it swelled into a sand storm of immense ferocity.

The storm, typical for the month of ‘gust, engulfed and battered the entire plain. For what seemed like countless hours the wasteland was lifted as sheets of desert sand into the air. You could not see your hand in front of your face.

The storm had a chaotic rhythm that ebbed and flowed almost imperceptibly with time. One moment it blew with tempestuous rage. The next instant it



gusted in crazy circles. Towards early morning, the wind gradually waned as it billowed away towards the horizon.

Dawn came agonizingly slow to the desert. The light crept up the eastern horizon. From a charcoal black, the sky turned first a deep blue, then vermilion and finally a crimson orange before bursting with an explosion of light that blinded you in seconds. The sun painted the desert in an intense yellow. Then the engine of massive destruction, a thermonuclear hell – the blazing sun – rose ominously above the horizon.

The radiance of the sun first swept across the crests of the dunes before marching down into the shadows. There was no escaping it. As the wind died down the sand became a textured featurelessness disturbed by faint wisps of wind and the occasional scuttling of giant armoured desert beetles.

The giant grey beetles were the first creatures to appear each dawn. Relics of a genetic experiment gone amok, the monsters were hypersensitive to motion in their surroundings and nearly indestructible.

The giant grey beetles had been bred to eat locust that once plagued the great wheat plains. With the locusts quickly eradicated, the plan was for the beetles to turn on themselves, but instead they destroyed the crops they were meant to protect, and then took to destroying the farmers meant to protect the crops.

In desperation, an arrogant biologist took it upon himself to create a virus to eradicate the giant grey beetles by poisoning them but the virus soon

mutated, creating a lethal condition similar to thalassemia in humans. If you were bitten by the beast or breathed in its venom there was a hundred percent certainty you would die. There was no known cure and the medical science that might have found a cure was no longer in existence, at least in this corner of the world.

If you were bitten by the beast or breathed in its venom death was not immediate. It would come slowly and surreptitiously. The virus attacked first your spleen and then your liver, and your blood would soon become poisoned with iron, which your body could no longer rid itself of. Then your blood would thicken and become viscous like molasses. It was a horrible way to die, if there was even a not so horrible way.

Their exoskeleton was so smooth that you could not catch them with gloved hands, and had to rely on your bare hands. If you were fast enough to catch and kill the beetle before it killed you, a knife between the hood and the armoured crest might do the trick. Otherwise they would take off a finger or your thumb and scurry off to feast, leaving you to die your slow and painful death.

If you thought a bullet or plasma jet would do the trick, beware not to breath in its green blood as an aerosol for the airborne virus was more lethal than the liquid borne one. A cross between a desert scorpion and common Japanese garden beetle if they saw you coming and knew their life was at stake they would spit in your face, or sent a jet of their venomous bodily fluid into the air for you to breath.

It had only taken them a handful of years to wreck their havoc. Now they could now survive the extremes of heat and cold found in the deserts.

The beetles had become the garbage collectors of the desert. What the sand and wind had not buried the beetle was sure to consume. They survived on the paltry remnants left by the cycle of predation in this unforgiving environment. When there was nothing to eat, they preyed on each other. Now only the largest, fastest and most ferocious survived.

They only feared one or two other creatures, one small and one less so.

Beneath the surface a creature began to sense the heat around it. During the frigid desert nights this predator slept. During the early morning and late evenings if caught in the desert it stalked its prey. A cold-blooded hunter, it needed the hellish desert sun to survive.

Far to the lee of a large dune a rattler pushed aside the sand blocking the entrance to its burrow. The snake poked its head out and tasted the air with its tongue before it slithered out. It was near sighted but nonetheless scanned the sky for any sign of a winged raptor, for although it was the hottest month of its year, death could still come swooping down in the blink of an eye.

The snake's protection was its senses, quickness and as a last resort its venom. It knew to not waste its venom in such a dry climate, for want of a true need to protect itself. To waste the venom would mean several days of vulnerability as its spit was replenished in the arid desert.

The rattler was also protected by its colour, a motley camouflage that matched its surroundings, and the slow, measured and deliberate way in which it moved across the desert. It had fought and won many battles but that didn't keep the snake from being cautious. Experience had taught it that stealth and vigilance guaranteed its survival.

The rattler rocked its head from side to side, flicking its tongue. Its olfactory system sensed neither predator nor prey. With only one fang it had not been too lucky as of late. The other fang it left in the leg of a large creature that had gotten away.

The snake prowled off in search of a meal. It knew that unless it soon found food starvation was only a few days away. Within mere seconds it had disappeared into the shimmering morning.

A breeze whispered across the arid plain blowing a miniature cloud before it. A giant beetle, alerted by its genetically engineered acute sense of smell, now aware of the danger of the approaching snake, stopped and stood immobile as the rattler slithered by.

Just a short distance away a finger pierced the crust of the sand, then several more, until a knarled hand materialized. Five thin black fingers stretched towards the sky, flexing as if coming to life for the very first time. More of the crust broke into pieces like a prehistoric egg and an arm emerged from the sand, then a shoulder then a covered and protected head.

A gold mask wearily turned to face the rising sun. Sand had blasted deep scratches across the once smooth surface of the faceplate. The early morning glare mirrored off the creature's face.

It next struggled out of the earth and into the bright yellow dawn sitting on the corner of the hole. It rocked its head from side to side and shrugged its shoulder and stretched. Slowly, deliberately the creature placed a hand over the faceplate to block out the sun and scanned the horizon.

The humanoid lifted itself out of the ground, and dusted sand off itself with the back of a hand. Then it kneeled on one knee, peered down into the hole, and reached down to lift out a small sack before slinging it over its left shoulder.

It extracted a pair of battered binoculars from the pouch and scanned its surrounding carefully. Then it spotted motion it was looking for, and slowly crouched extracting a pistol from the pouch on its side. It lifted the pistol and extended a shoulder stock, flicked sand off the sights and began to track an object across the dune. The shot, when it came left no echo. A puff of sand marked its impact. There was a spasm then the distant motion stopped.

Before it walked away from its warren the homonoid squatted and opened a small flap in her skin before setting a short drizzle of yellow, pungent liquid into the burrow. It marked its warren to keep the creatures of the desert from moving in, then closed the small flap and stood up. The creatures of the desert now knew to stay clear of this place.

She covered the opening of the warren with a piece of shiny material then patted sand carefully over the cover. The last thing the homonoid did was mark the opening with an equilateral triangle made up of three handfuls of sand. To a trained eye the mark would be visible, to the untrained eye, invisible

The humanoid then stood up and then began to carefully walk across the crests of the dunes until it came to its prey, the dead snake splayed across the sand. She had hit it squarely between its eyes.

A giant beetle was already feasting on its cadaver by the time the homonoid lifted the snake by the tail and gave it a good flick. The beetle's pincer was hooked into the cadaver. The beetle had to crush underfoot before it let go of the cadaver.

The humanoid tied the snake to a length of rope and dragged it behind itself as it began to walk towards the north. The humanoid walked faster than the beetles could give chase. Together, with the beetle in intermittent chase, trekked on for several hours. Eventually the giant beetle stopped giving chase and began to expire in the desert sun. The homonoid backtracked and turned the beetle over. As the sun began to back its belly, the beetle struggled frantically to right itself. The homonoid picked up some sand and let it drop from its hand to gauge the direction of the wind.

The homonoid moved a few steps back and upwind from the struggling beetle. Then with a giant pop the beetle spew its inwards in a death spasm in

the sand around its final resting place. Then the homonoid gathered several handful of sand to cover the mess.

The homonoid spent a few minutes looking back along the footsteps it had left in the sand. The footsteps continued for a great distance merging with the shimmering horizon. The steady easterly desert wind was already filling the most recent steps with sand. The homonoid turned to continue on its trek.

The humanoid stopped only once more, to observe from a distance a giant anthropoid. It slowly crouched and lay on the sand studying the anthropoid with its binoculars. Then it scanned the entire horizon for movement.

When it was convinced it was safe to proceed, the humanoid stood and continued its trek towards the giant structure.

By the time the homonoid had arrived at its destination the snake it had trailed behind had baked in the desert sun and was ready to be eaten. All that was required was to separate its outer skin from its succulent inside.

The anthropoid's shiny surface was covered in the fine dust of the mid-Western plains. As the humanoid approached it, this enormous machine loomed over the diminutive biped. A glare with the blinding light of the rising sun, the machine's massive photovoltaic panels made it appear like a giant winged insect.

In the shadow of the machine, the humanoid stopped and hung the now desiccated snake on a small metal protuberance. With well-practiced finesse the creature began to draw its five fingers from a glove. It removed one glove, then the other before tucking them both in its belt.

The two hands had fragile, diminutive and soft fingers. The finger nails were well tended and were strangely out of place given the fierceness harshness of the surroundings. The small hand next grappled behind its helmet to unclip the gold faceplate. The humanoid lifted off its helmet and freed its head of fiery red hair.

Cynthia 123 took her first breathes of unprocessed desert air in several hours. She coughed. Unlike the moist, cool air processed by the molecular sieve in her envirosuit, the unprocessed desert air was nearly completely arid. She looked up, and although she stood in the shadow of the machine, she knew the sky held the promise of another hellish day.

No matter how long I am exiled here, she thought, I shall never get use this place.

She stretched her arms above her head and arched her back. She had many times curled into a ball and burrowed into a subterranean warren to escape a ferocious desert storm.

An old and wise nomad had taught her how to bury into the sand to protect herself from the sudden and unforgiving perils of the desert. This priceless



knowledge had saved her life countless times when pirateers, predators and desert storms had threatened her existence.

Cynthia 123 knew, given her arduous life, she was fortunate she was still agile and flexible, for her advancing age, and the desert had begun to take its toll on her.

She extracted a knife from its scabbard and in a swift slice cut the rattler's tail off. She held it up to ear and shook it. She smiled. Well, she thought, at least four years old. She would have animal protein for dinner today.

Cynthia 123 turned to assess the state of the giant metallic anthropoid. The machine and its shadow gave the desert landscape an air of surrealism.

The massive, self-contained structure existed for one purpose, and one purpose only – as she existed for only a singular purpose – to produce life giving water to the Guild. The giant metallic anthropoid was a giant water condenser built in the shape of a giant wasp.

Each day the massive thin-film composite graphene solar panels produced electricity. Each night the stored electricity was used to produce water by a controlled diffusion through absorbent nanotube composites of the arid desert air, followed by a purge of refrigerated dry nitrogen from which the water was condensed out. The water, in turn, was stored away, locked deep inside the machine in immense reservoirs. The whole machine was called a condenser – even though condensation was only the last step of a remarkable simple process.

The absorbent nanotube composites had been a genetically engineered derivative from spider's silk, with a hydrophilic protein engineered in.

Underneath the condenser and for a hundred feet in all directions around it a series of giant reservoirs had been built over the years for the collected water. The condenser had robots whose programming was to continue to build copies of themselves and new water reservoirs using carbon extracted from the air and silicates from the sand which they processed into a brick that was strong and lightweight – more like a froth than a solid.

The robots cut and stack the bricks into a cylindrical structure that was then filled full of water. This was all buried away under the sand. If you did not know it was there you would not notice this save for the coolness of the sand above the great body of subterranean reservoir.

The condenser itself stood solitary and tall against the desert landscape. Its shape and design spoke of practicality and precision. The hyper-thin film solar panels made of grapheme photovoltaics hung like giant gossamer wings, belying their inherent strength. Protuberances and piping marked the entire length of the machine.

It was hard to gauge the age of the machine. From a distance it look relatively new. Close up it looked older and somewhat worn out. It was definitely older than she was.

The uncontrolled burning of carbon fuels by the Middle Kingdoms of Asia released such massive amounts of soot and smog that the rain patterns in the North Pacific was altered and the entire North America continent had been turned fallen into drought and then became a giant desert.

When it became apparent what was happening efforts were made to try to reverse the process. But large scale water diversions from the northern reaches of North America had failed.

Then more modern science suggested an alternative. The giant water condensers were built when ecological and economic desperation could still be answered by technological effort. When they were first built the condensers stood at the centre of sprawling communities. As the desert crept in the communities died and the people moved, leaving the condensers behind in the middle of nowhere. Then the desert over took the abandoned cities.

The water condensers had once been completely white, painted with titanium dioxide paint to alleviate the damage of UV on its exoskeletons. Over many years the ferocious desert winds had chipped away the paint, leaving only a patina that gave the machines an almost life like skin.

Cynthia 123 look upwards and she examined the machine. She was miniscule next to her mechanical ward. She set her ear against its side, closed her eyes and listened intently. The wind whistle softly but she ignored the higher frequencies. Her hearing was so acute that she could

sense the state of the myriads of automated pumps, valves and actuators, almost as well as the condenser's onboard computers.

She smiled. The machine's dull, rhythmic oscillations told her that the condenser had weathered the storm. The machine had a soul of its own, she thought. At times it ran smoothly, uncaringly, and at other times it shuddered as if to plead for Cynthia 123's attention. At night, she sometimes set herself down to be lulled to sleep by the rocking and cadenced motion of its giant scroll compressors.

She pulled sunglasses out of her pouch and put on a bright orange hat, tucked the edge of the hat into her collar before stepping out of the shadow. She walked around the giant machine, carefully assessing its many protuberances and panels. The solar panels were partially covered by sand. She would either rotate the panels to dust the sand off, or let the wind carry the sand away. Or she might use some of the precious water to wash the panels off. It was so hot that it wasn't much of a wash – more like a steam cleaning – of the grapheme solar panels.

Other than that, the condenser seemed to have weathered the storm without any obvious or new external damage, not that she expected any damage for the machine had weathered more ferocious storms than last night's tempest.

Whatever its state, as its "keeper", Cynthia 123 was there to care for it, to make sure it continued producing its valuable water. Once a month a heavily armed WATPOL hovercraft dispatched by the Guild was scheduled

to come to retrieve the bounty. But then that had slipped to every two months, then every six and finally periodically several times in a long time.

They would arrive unannounced. Cynthia 123 knew to hide away when the men came, for she sensed they would come looking for more than just the water. She never tested her assumption, but she knew she was wise to be careful. They had given up looking for her, for she was so tiny she could hide in places they would never think of looking.

Besides they needed her and it was in their best interest to leave her be! The precious water she produced kept thousands of people alive at settlements and prison encampments to the southeast where citizens struggled to stay alive and a growing number of state criminals toiled in the futile forced desertification program begun under the last civilian government. The Guild sprung from Home-Sec, a program whose original purpose had long been forgotten.

The precious water was important in another way too. When the fossil fuels became scarce in North America towards the year 2050, hydrogen sol-electrolized from the water, became the primary fuel of the state. For the state, control of the hydrogen resource became doubly important, as fuel for the large WATPOL fleet of tanks, helicopters, hovercraft and other surface vehicles.

The Guild knew the power of water: They knew that whomever controlled the fresh water resources of the water would control the World itself.

Before the Great Coup of '73 the water compressors were operated by paid employees – all freemen. When the Guild overthrew the last civilian government, the technicians disappeared, to be replaced by SPEPs – the “*Special Prisoners*”.

At the time of the Great Coup there were dozens of condensers in operation across the mid-West, producing millions of tonnes of water each month. With the passage of time, and the lack of proper maintenance, the numbers shrank. Today there was just a handful still in operation.

Cynthia 123 was a SPEP. She knew her job and did it well. They knew to leave her alone.

Cynthia 123 finished her inspection of the outside of the condenser. She was covered head to foot in fine desert sand and before she entered the machine she dusted the outside of her envirosuit with the back of her hand.

Once inside, Cynthia 123 reached down to unseam herself from her artificial skin. Her knarled envirosuit, made of engineered layers of graphene organo-composite, was a self-contained enclave against the harsh environment, impervious to storm, heat and UV radiation. Without it she would not be able to survive the desert for more than a few hours.

These envirosuits were invented for use of Mars, when extraplanetary exodus and colonization was being considered. The Guild ended all that and so the suits ended up finding their greatest use here in the arid desert.

The seam down the right side of the suit parted with the slightest effort. As she stripped the suit off she marvelled at its scintillating beauty and its soft touch. The envirosuit provided her with a skin tight covering yet at a millimetre thick had room for hundreds of micron thin layers of active and intelligent nanomachinery.

Cynthia 123 owed much of her existence to a mysterious nomad who happened upon her soon after her servitude began when she was twelve. The nomad had given her this prized gift in exchange for a periodic supply of her precious water. When he had given her the suit he said it would give her great strength and wisdom. Now she was seventeen and over the last five years, as she grew the suit somehow grew with her.

It had the remarkable feature of morphing as she grew, almost as if the envirosuit anticipated all her changes before they happened. It also kept her body smooth and free of hair, in a self-depilation that made her appear much younger than she really was. Because of the tight fitting nature of the envirosuit she understood why this was being done, but at times she thought it rather amusing.

On the occasion she set her envirosuit aside and decided to just enjoy the freedom of not wearing it, she would sprout fuzz on the most intimate of places. An hour's wearing of the envirosuit, and with a barely perceptible tickle, the fuzz was gone.

Cynthia 123 didn't know much about the suit. She marvelled at its scintillating beauty. She didn't know that the envirosuit material was made

of a three-dimensional weave of carbon polymers, graphene and diamond composites. All she knew was these beautiful fibres made the suit stronger than steel.

She did not know that her second skin was a body-conforming, nanocomputer which included artificial muscles powered by microelectronic stepper motors embedded in its micro-thin layers. The whole mechanism was powered by a microlayer of composite graphene that drew electricity from the light of its surroundings. When not in use she would sometimes recharge the mechanism by hanging it in the mid-day sun.

The heart of the mechanism was a dynamic nanocomputer of immense intellect that enveloped every curve and recess of her body. The intelligent nanomachinery gave the envirosuit material its strength and versatility, making it stretch, contract and bend to the whim of its wearer. Even the softness and colour of the material was programmable.

Cynthia 123 once stopped a plasma jet wearing her suit and while the kick threw her several metres and bruised several ribs, the fibres of her suit were not even scratched. The nanocomputer had reconfigured itself to compensate for the jolt done to its microprocessors. Through its internal repair algorithms, the suit did not show any damage.

As she studied it and caressed it she knew the suit was alive. The nomad on subsequent visits had taught her to use her thoughts to talk with the suit. It was tuned directly into her brain. The nomad had programmed the suit and then taught her how to converse telepathically with her suit. She was both



surprised and thrilled when the suit talked back to her the first time, almost as a living and breathing person would talk to a friend.

The suit was a living encyclopaedia of wisdom, knowledge and culture. Here in the desert, in the middle of nowhere it had been her teacher and had kept her alive. It was he that kept her sane.

She peeled away her outer skin to expose her bare, inner skin. She was not very tall, just one metre sixty-five, and thin for her age. She had small breasts and small hips. ...

As she hung it up to air the suit spoke to her “Are you taking me off?”

She smiled. “That’s pretty obvious don’t you think?”

It showed a little annoyance in its next words. “Your body temperature is down point two-seven degrees this morning. Please take care you do not stay in too long this morning. We do expect visitors in three point two five hours.”

“I want to sit outside for a while. Will you keep watch?” She knew to sit in the shadow of the machine, near the portal.

“Yes. External sensors are on line and functioning nominally. I think I will play several games of chess. I am studying the *Bruskiewich Variation* ....”

Cynthia 123 felt safe now that she was back home. “Good I wouldn’t want to be surprised by any unannounced visitors.”

A wisp of arid desert air blew a strand of her hair across her face. She brushed the strand back into place with her right hand. As she sat she looked down at the ground. Fine grains of sand were dancing in the ebb and flow of the morning wind. Sand was slowly piling up against her bare feet.

She watched as a rose coloured grain of sand tumble across the ground. It seemed much smaller and prettier than the other grains. She thought of how it must be for a grain of sand to be at the mercy of the wind. She thought how it must be to be at the mercy of anything.

After five years in the desert her skin still remained as supple as it was the day they exiled her to the desert. Such a healthy and beautiful girl hardly looked like a hardened criminal. Yet she was a SPEP.

Cynthia 123 got up, lifted the suit off the protuberance and walked through the portal. The door closed swiftly and efficiently behind her. It did not make a sound as it locked shut. In her bare feet she walked down a long corridor with gray pipes and conduits, all marked in fading letters.

As she walked away from the portal she could feel the air become cooler and moist. Her skin came alive with goose bumps. She did not mind her breast responding to the coolness of the air. It did not embarrass her, besides she was alone. Why should she care?

At the end of the corridor another portal opened and she stepped into an immense chamber as the centre of which was a giant and deep holding pool brimming with water. As she walked at its edge she bent down and ran her hand through the inviting water. It was cold, and this sent a shiver down her spine. The colder the better she thought.

She set her envirosuit down on the floor and sat down beside it and began to rub her left arm. As a force of habit she hoped that by rubbing often enough the number tattooed under her left arm would wear off with time.

Crouching with her back against the cold stainless steel of the chamber she caressed her aching knees. To crouch in her subterranean warren for hours and then to walk many hours seemed a small price to pay for the meat the snake would provide her. The snakes kept far away from humans and their machinery.

Cynthia 123 grew a wide variety of vegetables and fruit, but still craved meat from time to time. That's why she ventured so far into the desert in search of meat.

She once bagged a bird, but that was a lucky shot and proved disappointing in that the bird was thin and old had barely any meat on it. She knew, from experience, to go after the rattlers. They always seemed well fed. The snakes knew, as well, to go after her. Besides the thrill of the kill exhilarated her, as much as the thought that was prey for an adversary.

“Why do you do this each morning? You are only hurting your skin.”

She snapped back, “I thought you were playing chess.”

“I find the *Bruskiewich Variation* too complicated. I need a break. He was a super chess player.”

She said nothing and so he continued. “Do you mind that I ask? I have watched you do this nearly every morning. The mark can only be lifted off through laser incision.”

She continued to ignore him and stared at her tattoo. She knew he was right, but that didn’t stop her. Every morning, it was her ritual to rub at the symbols and remember. As she rubbed all that brought her here came back to her as vividly as if it had happened only yesterday.

On the eve of her twelfth birthday she had been arrested and tried for crimes against the state – “for stealing aqueous resources” from the reservoir outside of new Vegerville.

The Guild normally executed SPEP for the crime of WATTHEFT, but she was lucky. She was the few that legends are made from.

Their usual punishment, the only one the Guild seemed to mettle out to prisoners guilty of WATTHEFT, was death. Not a quick and merciful death mind you, the Guild knew no such retribution, but a slow, agonizing and painful death.

The condemned was stripped, forced fed salt water before being smeared with silicon gel and pegged to the ground in the baking sun. The silicon guaranteed a slow cook, a stewing of the condemned in their own fluids. The salt water emptied the condemned bladder and swelled the victim's throat to stifle their screams.

The prisoners were driven insane by the sun before they died. Most did not last more than a few days. All were forced to bear witness to the punishment, which occurred on the first and on the middle days of the month, and on those months were thirst got the better of more, on the added days in between. The punishment was the Guild's way to terrorize the populace into submission.

The public was forced to walk past the condemned on their way through the centre of town. As deterrence, the carcass was left to melt away and the pitiful bones left to bleach in the sun for all to see. Many chose to take the circuitous route around the town to avoid the gruesome sight.

There were other crimes that saw punishment. Cynthia 123 once watched a SPEP put to death. The victim, a boy she knew was chattel for a large household, was slated to be rendered. A male slave could remain whole only until the onset of puberty. Then they were rendered.

The night before his rendering, the boy had climbed the wall and set off to the west. He got no further than a day's journey before he was caught. He knew the risk and knew the consequence.

His punishment was immediate. He was set to the pegs, rendered and then left to bleed to death. From time to times in her nightmares, his cries for mercy still rang out in Cynthia 123's ears.

For a moment she paused in her remembrances and looked up. The hollow boom of the main compressor filled the chamber with its power. It ran on a low voltage starter, which caused the hollow boom when the machine started. Then she felt a slight tremor as the machine picked up in speed and smiled.

She smiled. All was well. She went back to her thoughts.

She found herself staring in the distance, thinking how lucky she was. For many months the WATPOL had known that a young girl was swimming in the state reservoir. They had searched high and low for her yet, despite the reach of their technology, were never able to catch her. They tried many times to ensnare her but somehow she would outwit them at every turn.

They used hypersensitive atmospheric chromatographs to try to smell her out. Her pheromones told them that they were looking for a prepubescent girl. They used acoustic discriminators to measure her steps and follow her tracks. That's how they knew she was young. They used cryogenically cooled selenium oxide imagers to take pictures of her at a great distance at night. That's how they knew that she swam in the reservoir, and stole sips of water while she swam.

It frustrated the WATPOL to no ends.

Foolishly, she thought it was a game. Like a tiny shrew she would be in their sensor fields one moment and disappear into the night in the next.

What they didn't know was that every time she swam she also drank and every time she left the reservoir, she took some of the water back with her, which carried as urine became a valuable commodity which kept her and her mother fed. She would empty herself in a solar still and by the same afternoon they had a litre or more of fresh water.

Her mother and her used this water to meet their gardening needs and what was left over was bartered for things they needed. This had gone on for many intriguing months.

As word of her escapades leaked out, the legend grew in New Vegerville of a defiant "little one." As legends go hers grew to such heights that she became their treasured symbol of non-violent defiance.

Through no choice of her own she had become their heroine, the focus of their struggle against the misery and oppression of the Guild and the WATPOL. All she was trying to do, like everyone else, was survive.

It was not her actions but her legend that made her so dangerous to the Guild, for as her legend grew so too did the embarrassment of the Guild. Just as they were being debated in every corner of first the town, then the region, then the territory, her exploits were also be discussed and dissected

for their socio-political implications at the highest strategic levels of the Guild.

The omnipotence and prestige of the Guild was being challenged – and by a twelve year old girl. If a “little one” could defy them, they feared that similar acts of defiance, and even full scale rebellions, would spread without check within their realm.

The Guild could not accept that they stood defied by the action of a “little one.” They also knew that once caught she could not be set as an example in the usual sense.

Around the subject of the “little one”, factions split within the established order. Alliances formed and balances swayed as her exploits was argued in minute detail. Finally two contending factions prevailed. Stamp her out and erase her memory some counselled. Dead legends fade away they contended.

The other view was that this would only make her a martyr, and the Guild could not afford the risk. While dead legends do not talk, their followers keep dead legends alive. They argued that she needs to be found, tried and made to fade away into oblivion, but “expiration is not to be inflicted” they cautioned.

Ultimately, after many months of secretive deliberation, the decree was duly draft, duly signed and counter signed at all levels of the Guild and then duly issued. The “little one” was to be captured alive and unharmed, they would



have to deal with her as a SPEP and exile her. The exile would be to a condenser, an irony not lost on the dominant faction.

What ever they wanted, they did not want to elevate her into martyrdom. Only they had the right to make heroes, and then only loyal ones. “Whomever captured the little one would be made a hero” the Guild decreed.

Once captured, her punishment would be made public and she would be made an example of the power of the Guild and the futility of revolt.

At the time Cynthia 123 was too young to understand the dimensions and consequence of her actions let alone the effect it was having on the socio-political balance of power.

After al, all she was doing was sneaking in for a midnight swim and a few gulps of water. Perhaps she should have known better, but in her youthfulness she had a naïve sense of the dangers that awaited her.

She kept her actions from everyone, except her mother. It was too hot to venture forth during the day. Her mother knew not to ask her what she did at night ... only that she be careful. Her mother could understand her actions. It went beyond her age or their circumstances. It went beyond the little town they were trapped in.

Cynthia 123 was very close to her mother, who looked after her as best as she could. Her mother was a baker's assistant, which meant they sometimes had food on their table even when others went hungry.

Her defiance grew from the memory of her father, a memory so blurred by time that Cynthia 123 could no longer separate the facts from the fiction she created of him. She had let her imagination play out so the in her measure, her father was larger than life, a mythical figure that had fought the Guild at every quarter.

Her father's fight, in her sense of things, was a fight not of guns but of wits, for after all her father had been a great scientist. He had made a difference in the world, when a difference could still be made by a single man. He had made a difference in the world not by those he could hurt but by those he could help.

Her mother no longer talked about him. Yet even with the passage of time her sorrow surrounding his sudden and unexplained disappearance did not diminish. "They forced him away", she said. "Free he was a threat the Guild could not endure. His brilliance would eventually topple them."

Her father was a wise, and principled man who to protect his family, packed a satchel and marched into the desert. The wind buried his tracks and no trace of him was ever found. They searched all over for him but somehow he had managed to elude them. Even Cynthia 123 could not connect the memory of her father with the nomad that sought her out and gave her the envirosuit.

At one point the Guild told her mother that he had not survived, but Cynthia 123 knew her father was made of sterner stuff. If they had captured him they wouldn't have killed him to begin with, but in slavery he would have died, not perhaps physically but surely in spirit. Her father once told her that a person with a dead spirit is worst than death itself.

Cynthia 123 knew she owed it to her father to right the evil she saw around her. She would make a difference in the world, like her father ... not in those she could hurt but instead by those she could help. If caught she would plead the folly of youth. For their own clear and decreed reasons the Guild would not plead compassion.

For many months the game continued. She would sneak in at night. They would give chase. She would elude. She miraculously escaped capture ... until one fateful day.

Against any better judgement. She had invited her best friend into her nocturnal secret. Her friend Anna 125, was a few years younger. Blond with green eyes, she looked like a trustworthy friend and out of place amongst all the brown eye ragamuffins. The two had become instant friends and had grown up together.

Although times had been harsh, the two had managed to share many happy hours together exploring the grottos and forgotten corners of the town. They also found many hiding places and underground passageways around the town. The dust, dirt and grim didn't bother them.

They also know where to find exciting things, long abandoned. Strange things that once had rubber wheels and doors, but the machines had been stripped entirely bare of anything valuable or negotiable. There were hundreds of these strange machines rusting away all over the town.

Cynthia 123 and her closest friend played together, read together and shared the intimacy of two kindred spirits. Together they dreamed of a future with the return of rain, of plentiful water, of green lush fields (it was rare they saw anything green).

And they dreamed of “Freedom”, a word that Cynthia 123 had repeatedly heard from her father. It should have been a warning that Anna 125’s father was a poorly paid low level functionary in the Guild. Anna 125’s mother was a mid-wife and had delivered Cynthia 123. But in the end, her friendship with Anna 125 seemed straightforward and innocent enough.

She was shocked to find out at her sentencing (no trial was forthcoming for SPEPs like her) that her best friend was a WATPOL informant who rolled on her best friend and turned her in.

The fateful night they appeared with bright lights and horses. She could not hide in the darkness of the night. She tried to out run them but the horses were too fast. She tried to out fox them but they seemed to know what she would do next.

She tried to escape by one of her few secret routes, but they were all blocked by the robotic hounds. No matter which way she turned they were there waiting for her – men on foot, men on horseback and with the hounds. Their robotic hounds could see in both the visible and the infrared, and they had programmable olfactory sensors ten times more sensitive than real hounds.

The WATPOL had obviously planned ahead, and she had been lulled into a false sense of security. Before she realized that her familiarity with the place had made her complacent they set on her. She gave them a good chase but it was just a matter of time before the horsemen caught her. They chased her for over an hour before, in sheer exhaustion, she could flee no longer.

They chased Cynthia 123 the length of the reservoir and as she back tracked there was a few seconds of confusion as the force of horsemen folded back and rode in their midst. She took the momentary confusion as a chance to roll in the mud and then bury herself in the thick oozing slime.

For several minutes the horseman frantically searched. She heard one of them shout “she could not have gone far.” He evidently was in charge.

She watched him closely as he circled about and rode towards her. He did not seem angry. In a sense, he seemed merely professional. He handled his horse with one hand on the reins and directed his men with his other hand. His words were not yelled, they were merely spoken with an authority that boomed through the night. Cynthia 123 guessed that if he were asked he would merely say to her he was doing his job, and his job was to catch her, nothing more.

Her lungs were bursting from the effort of her run. Her heart was beating so fast she could barely hear anything else but its hammering. Her head was about to explode. In a slow and measured way she caught her breath. Now that she was stationary, she seemed less worried, although the danger was a mere gallop away.

As her breath returned to normal, a new challenge confronted her. It was the green and brown ooze she had hid herself in. The stench of the decaying organic material in the mud was causing her to gag but she forced the vomit back down her throat.

She would have escaped detection but as the lead horseman got close to where she lay and his horse was to step on her. The horse sensed she was there but she didn't realize that until it was too late. She flinched. Not much, only a hoof's width, but that slight flinch was all it took.

The lead horseman saw her and swiftly leapt off his horse. He almost landed on top of her. She pushed him over and started to run. She heard him fall and curse. The mud made everything slippery. She scrambled towards the water edge. A strong pair of arms grabbed her, but slipped off. The grab knocked her off her feet.

She fell head first into the mud and started to retch. Still she didn't give up. She crawled on all fours but then started to vomit. It was then she realized she had to stop. If she didn't, she would choke on her own vomit.

The horseman let her throw up ... retching once, twice and then a third time. Then they were upon her. In her weakened and pitiful state she still he fought them though and got to the water's edge but now they surrounded her on all four sides.

The lead horseman spoke to her. "Come on little one. There is nowhere to run." She circled around her with arms extended.

The lead horseman took a step closer to her and spoke again. "I have orders to catch you ... and I want to bring you back alive and whole." Cynthia 123 didn't cringe at the thought of dying ... it was the other thought, that of living a crippled and painful life.

She slowly let down her arms. The lead horseman ordered his men not to cause her harm. Then the men on foot arrived and set upon her. She punched and kicked but there was just too many of them.

When they finally overwhelmed her she was bedraggled in front of the pose, still bare, covered from head to toe in mud, and dripping from both the water she had run through and her own sweat.

They started to laugh. What a pitiful sight. To them she was just another capture. One of many. It was clear she no longer wished fight them. The lead horseman stepped forward and sternly took her arm. Her arm was fragile and frail compared to the muscles in his arm. He held her wrist firmly, flicked the mud off with his finger, then squirted a thick, gooey,

green liquid over the exposed skin on her arm and then jabbed her with a epi-syringe.

Although she was now cooperating (she knew best to do this) they nonetheless tranquilized her with an injection. As they did this Cynthia 123 knew what to expect. She had seen the WATPOL do this to prisoners. The WATPOL had long ago discovered the efficiency of drugs in controlling their prisoners.

Her heart was still beating and adrenaline still racing through her body that the injection took only a few seconds to take effect. She was conscious of what was going on around her, yet calm and numb. She slowly lost the strength in her legs and sank to the ground.

It was only then that they bound her wrists, and then her ankles with rough rope. The lead horseman removed a bandana from around his neck and gagged her. The bandana tasted of salty sweat and dust. As he did up the bandana he looked into her eyes and strangely she felt vulnerable yet safe at the same time.

He lifted her and heaved her across the back of his horse and then mounted for the long ride back to New Vegerville. In a state of fading consciousness she watched the dark ground pass under her as the horse made its journey back to town. He could feel his hand on her backside, steadying her as the horse swayed back and forth. He had removed his gloves and so she could feel his skin against hers. And the warmth. His warm hand was reassuring.



As they rode into New Vegerville she had visions of her being staked to the ground under the blazing sun. Her anxiety was not for herself, since she saw no hope for escape. Her apprehension was for her mother and how lonely she would be once Cynthia 123 was gone.

This apprehension, though, could not keep her awake as the injection dragged her first into stupor, then sleep, then nightmares.

As she swayed back and forth the snorting of the horses mixed with the surrealism of her nightmares. She was being chased by creatures hell bent on devouring her. Over and over she tried to flee, but over and over they caught her and, like Saturn and its young, chewed her to bits as she remained conscious through the whole. Try as she must she could never escape the creatures nor escape from her nightmare.

When they entered New Vegerville soon after dawn she was awoken by a harsh slap to her backside from the lead horseman. She screamed and started to tilt headfirst off the horse. He grabbed her shoulder and someone grabbed her bound legs and manhandled her off the horse.

She could not stand by herself. The mud had by now hardened all over her body, save on her belly and breasts which had pressed against the saddle on the horse, and one or two more intimate places which had been kept moist by her sweat.

Supported on one side by the tired horse and on the other side by the tired horseman her ankles were untied. The guard let go of her. She crumpled to

the ground and sat silent for several minutes while the fog lifted from inside her head. Her legs were pins and needles as the circulation was restored. She reeked of her sweat, the sweat of the horse, and the remnant of the foul mud.

To add to her misery she was now covered from head to foot with a white layer of fine clay and dust, caked on by sweat. Her hair was a tangle of branches and mud. During the night her body had been scratched by the small bushes the horse had wandered through in their trek back.

The injection had caused a terrible headache that had been made worst by the rough handling as she lay across the saddle on the horse. The constant bumping had so weaken her kidneys that nature took its course. She urinated where she sat. The horse stared down at her and humphed. She looked up and saw that the horse had turned his head and was watching her with its soulful eyes.

Cynthia 123 seemed to understand what he was thinking and hoped he wouldn't. But the horse have a mind of its own. Before she could move out of its way the horse let go with a stream of urine that covered her from head to foot.

She tried to scramble away but found she was trapped between the horse and the guard. All she could do is turn her back to the stream. When the horse was finished it proudly ambled away.

The guards were laughing. She looked a pathetic sight. “The horse has got more sense than you,” one of them said. She started to cry. As if things could not get any worst.

One of her guards dragged her up off the ground, flipped her upside down and slung her across his shoulder. “Oh boy do you smell!” He smacked her on her bare backside. “It’s to the wash down for you.”

Cynthia tried to kick to work her way free from his grip but without success. He wrapped an arm around her legs and pinned them to his shoulder. “Leave me alone,” she screamed, “let me go. ”

She tried to beat her fists against his back but the guard reached behind with his other arm and pulled hard at the cuffs. She found herself being tugged in two.

“Stop, you t re hurting me,” she screamed. “let me go!”

“Now, now. That would spoil our fun, wouldn’t it.” She felt hopeless and alone.

The lead horseman had been watching as the guard slung her over his shoulder. He looked at her and then at the guard. “Take special care of her.” The guard nodded.

Then the lead horseman smiled. His smile surprised Cynthia 123. It was more than a smirk and had some warmth and emotion to it. For a split second she was off guard. Then they started to move.

Silently she looked back at the lead horseman as the guard lugged her away. She looked over her shoulder to see where they were going. “Where are you taking me?” The guard carried her across a courtyard and into a small building.

The small building had a single room with two bare light fixtures. The floor was wet and has a giant drain in the centre of the room. On the wall closest to the door were hoses and scattered around the room with pails and other tools.

The guard set her down on the floor. She lay splayed out on the floor, hands and feet still bound. Cynthia 123 felt her ribs against the ragged concrete. The guard grabbed one of the hoses and turned it on. She had just enough time to turn her back to her captor before he began to spray her with a high pressure jet of frigid water.

The force of the jet threw her hard against the wall. She began to scream. She felt something rough against the small of her back. She turned her head to see that the other guard had begun to scrub her down with a brush on the end of a rusted shaft. The old brush smelled of a strong disinfectant. She tried to crowd into a corner of the room.

“Stop squirming. We’ve got to wash you of missy. You smell like a horse piss and there’s Plague about. Besides, you have to smell your best for the judge,” one of her captors bellowed. She could hardly hear him above the roar of the water.

He scrubbed in long forceful strokes, up her back and down her arms and legs. The force of the jet and the strength of the disinfectant turned her back into a red, raw sheet of skin. Every nerve was throbbing in her body. Every little scratch on her burned with the most excruciating pain.

“Turn around,” the guard with the brush ordered. Cynthia 123 screamed and shook her head, and began to slowly collapse down the wall. She tried to curl up into the fetal position.

“Missy I don’t want to do this the hard way. We’re late enough as it is.” Still she didn’t move. The guard pushed her with his boot. She pushed back with her hand.

“Listen, I don’t want to hurt you. I’ve got a tittle one a bit younger than you at home and she’s waiting to see me. We’ve been here since midnight. You’re late and in enough trouble as things are. Let’s get this over with so I can get home.”

She curled her cuffed hands around her knees and sat in as tight a ball as she could. She began to rock from side to side as she cried.

"I guess we will have to do it the hard way. " The guard with the brush grabbed her arm. He plucked her clear off the ground before letting go.

She fell against the wall. Before she could move he had clamped his hand to her jaw and turned her around to face the hose. The spray forced her back against the wall. She let out another shrill scream but only ended up swallowing a lungful of water.

The guard took hold of her arm again and continued scrubbing even harder. "Missy if you continue to struggle its only going to hurt." She squirmed as he scrubbed up her legs and across her chest. She tried to push the brush away with her cuffed hands but he was too strong.

She beat against his hand to try to break free of his grip but the guard dug his hand further into her arm. His hand was like a steel vice crushing her bicep. She lowered her head and bit his thumb. With the back of the brush he struck her just below her knee. The pain shot through her leg. Her leg started to buckle under her.

She bit his hand again. This time he struck her in the stomach. The force of the blow was just enough to knock the breath out of her. She doubled over, gasping for air. She knew she was losing. If she continued to struggle she did not know where things would end.

He let the brush fall to the ground and pressed his body against hers, pinning her to the wall. He was so close that she could see and count the stubble on his chin. His breath was hot and heavy across her face. She pushed him

away as hard as she could but he was too big and strong. Between her gasps she tried to force out the word, but even the two letters could not force their way out.

He poured disinfectant over her head and began to work it into her hair. The foul green liquid oozed its way down her face. She closed her eyes as tight as she could but the liquid still burned. He began to wipe her face with the disinfectant. She let out a throttled scream inches from his ears. The guard covered her mouth with his hand.

She was gagging. He took his other hand and began to scrub her mons pubis. She tried to scream but her nose and mouth was covered. She couldn't breathe. "I gotta clean everywhere Missy. Never know where the Plague hides." She tried to kick him but he had pinned open her legs with his.

His hand was big and his skin rough as sandpaper. He scoured hard, nearly lifting her off the ground. She was on her toes trying to escape the manhandling. The disinfectant found its way into every crevice and stung badly. She tried to close her legs but he had pinned her tightly against the wall.

She felt victimized in the worst possible way. She had no control. All she could think about was his hand. She tried to close her mind, but everything seemed focused on her worst fear. Everything else didn't matter.

Would his hand curl? She tried to think of her mother's face. Would his fingers pierce? She tried to remember her favourite song. Would she lose

what little she could call her own? Her body went slack. Everything around her seemed to stop.

He let go of her mouth so she could breath again. She tried to scream but her lungs were empty. She began to get sick. Before she could be sick she knew she had to breathe. She had to get her wind back. She tried to force back her nausea. Her heart pounded in her chest.

In a few seconds it was all over. For the first time she looked into his eyes. They were cold grey, lifeless eyes.

“There. It wasn’t that bad. I don’t like doing this any more than you liked having it done, but I’ve got my orders.”

The guard stepped back. She felt herself free of the wall, but only for an instant. The frigid water crashed against her once again. Her mind and body went into shock. She just wanted to curl up and hide. The manhandling she was enduring was too much to bear for a girl of twelve or for girl for that matter.

While she lay in the corner for several minutes. Another prisoner was brought in, a boy about her age. He was covered in dirt and dry clay. They cut away his clothes and proceeded to spray him down. The young boy was limp and placid. Obviously he had been drugged. The two guards let her be as they proceeded to wash the dirt and mud off the other prisoner.



The young boy then noticed her and smiled. His eyes, which had shown no feeling at all until now, emanated a warmth that seemed out of place in the cold, grey brutality of the surroundings. Cynthia 123 did not feel self-conscious as he looked at her. He then closed his eyes and went faint.

One of the guards opened the boy's mouth and poured a thick white liquid down his throat. He gagged and coughed but did not regain consciousness. The other guard then lifted the unconscious boy and carried him out of the room.

The remaining guard sat on a stool next to the door and ignored her. Cynthia 123 closed her eyes and listened to the sounds. The drip, drip, drip of the water soon put her to sleep.

Cynthia 123 couldn't remember much of what happened to her next. All she could remember was the sweet and delicious taste of the pink liquid that was poured down her throat to revive her. When she finally opened her eyes it took a moment for the burning of the disinfectant to subside before she could begin to focus. She saw she was laying on her side in a pool of water. The guard was leaning over her.

She turned her face away and tried to focus her eyes. Everything seemed blurred. The guard got up and walked out of the room. Now that he was gone she felt a little better.

Cynthia 123 hadn't noticed much of where she was when she was dragged into this place. As her breathing returned to normal she cautiously looked

around and found that she was alone in the cell-. Harsh, clinical lights lit the room. It smelled of urine and disinfectant. Next to the door were several-green jackets hanging from the wall.

All, around her were strange, sinister looking instruments. Her eyes stopped on the largest of them, a chair at the end of a long levered arm. The chair hung several feet above what looked like a vat of steaming liquid. She noticed the straps on the chair. It was only then she realized how badly she was shivering. She could not tell whether it was because she was cold or whether it was because she was in shock. She curled into a ball.

Looking up she saw for the first time the cameras hanging from the ceiling. They were placed so that no corner of the room was outside the field of view of at least two cameras.

Her mother had told her stories of this place. How her mother knew Cynthia 123 about the Interrogation and Indoctrination Centres she never quite found out. She suspected it had something to do with her father. A lot of the questions about her father remained unanswered.

Now that she was awake Cynthia 123 half expected someone to return and question her. No one came. Cynthia 123 waited several- minutes before sitting up. She had just enough strength to pivot herself off the floor and lean up against the wall.

Every muscle and bone in her body ached. She pressed her face against the wall and felt the cool- concrete against her bare cheek. After what she had

just been through even the harsh feel of the ragged concrete felt comforting to her.

With her right hand she began to stroke her sore arm and shoulder. They were both badly bruised. She moved her arm and found the motion limited by the pain. She ran her fingers along her ribs to see if they were perhaps broken, but thought them bruised instead.

It was then that she saw that her body was covered with countless scratches. Small trickles of blood spotted her chest, legs and stomach. Her body was bright red. Her back and backside felt raw.

She looked down and saw she was sitting in a pool of red water. Cynthia 123 began to panic. Her mother had warned her of this, but nothing could prepare her for the feeling of total terror that came across her! Out of the corner of her eye she looked up at one of the cameras. Whatever she did she would not let them see, not let them know!

She let her hand drop into her lap and carefully moved it down between her legs. She covered her eyes from the harsh lights with her other hand. Cynthia 123 gently touched her skin. The folds were inflamed. The lips were tender to the touch. With two fingers she slowly parted the lips and found the top of the fold.

When she touched it a blend of warmth and discomfort ran across her stomach. It was a sensation she had never felt before, at least not with such

intensity. She slowly ran her finger in a circle around the place. It felt sore but undamaged. Her legs started to shake.

She cautiously edged her finger along the crease until she found what she was feeling for. Her adrenalin was coursing through her entire body. She couldn't tell by touch alone.

She narrowed her eyelids and tried to focus. There was too much light and her hand was trembling. She closed her eyes and ran her finger in a converging spiral, trying to envisage whether anything had changed. The warmth grew in intensity. Except for the sensation, everything seemed as before.

She opened her eyes and looked again. Her legs were tremoring. Then she saw what she had hoped. Her panic melted away. I guess he was just doing his job, she thought. She was untouched. Then she looked down at the liquid she was sitting in. It wasn't as red as she thought it was a moment ago. In her exhaustion, her mind was playing tricks. Or maybe it was the lighting.

After all- the terror of the past hour the relief she now felt pushed all of her worries aside. She felt warm and alive. A sense of renewed strength and determination came over her. They had had their way with her, but now she thought it was time to resist. She had something beside her life worth fighting for.

She ran her fingers back to where she had begun. Gently she caressed the centre of her most special pleasure. As she watched, the splendour of her gender revealed itself like a rose opening in the warmth of the sun. The transformation from inert to living flesh sent shivers to every corner of her body and soul.

For several minutes all around her escaped her notice. As it had done many times before, her rapture freed her from her misery. Whatever they would forbid her, she thought, they could not forbid her this personal happiness.

At the height of her ecstasy, and for a reason unknown to her, she recalled something her father once told her. “You have nothing to fear in life but fear itself.” It gave her strength remembering the dignity of his words.

It was then that the guard re-entered the room. She immediately ended her secret pleasure and hoped he had not noticed. She stopped shivering. Cynthia 123 felt utterly exhausted, but alive and courageous.

The guard who had washed her down strode over to her and gently lifted her onto her feet. Her legs nearly buckled. The guard helped Cynthia 123 to steady herself. With a whisper he said "you are lucky to be alive, little one.

They are not going to punish you ... at least not the usual punishment for what you have done. The boy, though, he wasn't so lucky.”

She pushed him back and turned her head away. “Please leave me alone,” she pleaded.

He stole a glance up at the cameras. “ Missy. All I know is they’re watching careful what he say and do. “

“I’ve been ordered to do just that. There must be a very important reason they want you for,” he answered.

She looked back in astonishment. “Who want me? “

He smiled at her. “I can’t really say, so you better stay quiet.”

He looked closely at her chest and arms. “You have nasty scratches that need attending. Here drink this.” He thrust a cup in her hand. It contained a thick purple liquid. She was too thirsty to care whether it might do any harm and drank it down.

While she was drinking he walked over to the opposite wall and lifted two buckets up from the floor. He carried the buckets back to her and set them down at her feet. She saw steam lifting from the liquid. He took the empty cup from her.

“It’s only water, Missy. I’ve been ordered to tend to you.” The guard took a cloth and soap from the bottom of one of the buckets.

The guard held the hot cloth in his right hand and gently began to wipe the last of the frigid water off her body. He started with her face and worked his way down her sore chest and back. The cloth felt deliciously soft.

Cynthia 123 closed her eyes and let her strength return. His stroke was gentle yet firm. She knew by his caress that he took care not to scrub too hard. He kneeled before her and started to wipe up her legs. When he got to the top he hesitated.

She opened her eyes and looked down into his. He looked up at her. His eyes were no longer cold and lifeless. They showed a spark of concern and compassion she had not seen there before. Her intuition, the only armor she had left to defend herself with, told her trust him. Besides, she was too exhausted to fight.

“Please Missy, I am not going to hurt you. I’m just doing my job. “

"Why should I trust you?"

He lowered his chin and his voice. “You’re the only thing my little girl talks about.”

Her father once told Cynthia 1-23 that words and ideas could be mightier than anger and arms. In an instant Cynthia 123 saw a way to fight back. “Do you love your little girl?”

“Of course I do.”

“What would she think about what you are doing to me?”

He looked down and did not answer. Instead he started to wash her feet. "I'm just doing my job."

His fingers were tickling her foot. She pulled it away. He stopped washing her feet and ran the back of his arm across his forehead.

"Some job! My mother is a baker. That's a job that helps people. "

"I'm just following orders." He bent over and started to wash her calves.

She wasn't about to let up. "She bakes bread. She helps people. You go around hurting people."

The guard looked up at the camera. "Enemies of the state aren't people."

"What are they then?" She snapped right back.

Again he did not answer. He had gotten up to the knee.

"I'm not an enemy of anyone, yet look at me. I'm here."

The guard stopped scrubbing and leaned back. He looked up at her. "Missy, you must have done something wrong."

"All I was doing was swimming. What so wrong about that?"

He looked down again. "My job is not to judge. "



“What do you do then, besides hurt people? Don’t you worry about what you do?”

“No. What does it matter what I do?” The guard stopped again and looked up into her eyes. He had finished washing her thigh.

“Every person has to be a judge of their actions,” she said. “They have got to know whether what they do is right or wrong.” Cynthia 123 was repeating from memory something her father had once told her. Only now, she understood what it meant.

The guard’s hand loosened his grip. Cynthia 1-23 felt it was time to soften a bit. “Does your little girl like bathing? Doesn’t she like to look pretty?”

“Yes she does. She tells me all girls like to look pretty. But that’s not the point.”

All the years of arguing with her mother was about to pay off . “What is the point then?”

“You have done something wrong and you were caught. That’s the only point that matters ... to me.” His pause spoke wonders to her. She was getting through to him

Cynthia 123 softened her voice and in the most feminine tone she responded, “I’ve done nothing wrong. “

The guard huffed. There was a pause of several seconds. The talk about his little girl took the edge off her suspicion. With his daughter as her deterrence he seemed less of a threat. Her intuition told her now was the time to act. She opened her legs just a bit.

He noticed this and reached down into the bucket with the cloth. He rung the cloth, wiped some soap onto it and finished to wash the top of her thighs. He stopped and looked into her eyes. Finally, he washed between her legs. Where before she had tried to fight him, this time he was slow and tender.

The rhythm of his caress made her whole body sway. A shiver ran across her stomach. His eyes were just inches away from her belly button. He could not help but notice her shiver.

“Are you cold Missy?”

It was now mid-day and even though the room was hot and humid she knew she had to lie. “Yes. I’m weak and hungry. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. “

In a whisper he answered. “If you are good, I’ll see what I can do.”

A feeling of deep calm came across her. She lifted her hands and rested them on his head as much to balance herself against his caresses as to thank him.

She ran her fingers through his hair. Her intuition told her a little flirting would finalize the arrangement. “How old is your daughter?” she continued.

Cynthia 123 tried to concentrate on his words. "Not as old as you ... six."  
Her breathing was getting shallow.

"Is she pretty?" The rhythm was causing her legs to buckle. She must not lose her composure.

"Just like you." He lowered his advantage. "

She whispered back. "Why are you telling me this?"

He didn't answer. When he had finished she lifted her cuffed hands in front of him, hoping that the last few minutes had bought her some sympathy. He got up. "sorry Missy, it's against orders."

"Can I at least have something to wear?" she asked.

"Sorry, that too is against orders."

Without warning, perhaps to punish her for her brashness, he lifted one of the buckets and dumped its content over her head. She let out a surprised shriek. The hot water was a welcomed contrast to the col- harsh jet of water that had accosted her just moments before.

"Why did you do that?", she screamed.

"Because I felt like it." He threw a towel at her. "Dry yourself with this. "

It was a small, rough towel but it was clean and it would have to do. She dried herself as best she could wringing the small, rough piece of fabric twice..

He waited for her to finish then he took the towel from her and then handed her a piece of bread to eat. She took a small bite. Her eyes grew bright.

She tasted it, that familiar flavour which only her mother could bake into her bread.. “Thanks,” she whispered, “my mother's bread taste so good.” She started to lose her composure and tears welled into her eyes.

The guard noticed this and bowed his head and under his breath said. “Keep your wits intact. Don’t cry little one.” She looked up at him and then recognized him. He would come to her mother’s bakery from time to time to buy food. This familiarity gave Cynthia 123 enough reason to trust him. She looked up at him and stopped feeling so upset. You know he’s right, she thought. I have to keep my wits. I am on my own now.

She took another bite of her mother’s bread, and chewed it ever so carefully. It was fresh, perhaps baked that very day. She could still taste the yeast and the butter. Where her mother got the butter no one knew for there had not been cows anywhere New Vegerville for as long as Cynthia 123 could remember. She looked up at him.

He continued barely moving his lips and so silent she had to listen carefully to catch his every word. “I will say to your mother that I have seen you and tell her you are fine and that she should not worry.”

She closed her eyes and slowly finished the morsel of her mother’s bread. She knew it would be a long time before she would taste that loving flavour again. Cynthia began to regret this day and everything that brought her to this moment.

“Let me do something about those wounds.” He took a small blue aerosol can from his uniform pocket, shook it and began to spray the scratches on her body. “This should take the sting out.”

As he treated the scratches on her skin Cynthia 123 decided to see how far he could be pushed. Cynthia 1-23 would do this with her mother whenever she felt in a fighting spirit. “I bet you don’t do much of this around here. “

“Do what?”

“You know, give prisoners aid after pushing them about.”

The guard’s demeanour suddenly changed. “Mind what you say Missy. They might just change their minds. “

Obviously the guard was under strict orders. She pressed on.

"Why should it matter what I say. Nothing I say or do will make much of a difference." She began to wonder again about her mother. Will she manage without Cynthia 123, or me without her?

Out of the other pocket he took a blue light and began to scan it up and down her body. "It will activate the antibiotic aerosol. With what little I have at hand, I can't do much more for you."

"You could let me go?" She pleaded with her eyes.

He just shook his head and huffed. "You know I can't do that."

Cynthia 1-23 turned away. She wished she was safe at home with her mother.

The guard lifted a comb out of his pockets and began to untangle her wet hair. "Well, at least I can make you look a bit more presentable for the judge."

Her hair was such a tangle. The comb caught in her curls. He pulled and tugged the comb free. She began to squirm. "Leave it alone. You're hurting me."

She tried to pull the comb from her hair. He didn't take notice and continued to comb.

“Didn’t you hear me? You’re hurting me!” She pulled the comb from his hands. “I’ll do it!”

The guard let her comb her hair for several minutes. She took her time as much to annoy him as to annoy the persons at the other end of the camera. When he thought she had done enough he yanked the comb from her hand.

“Take it easy, you’ll blow a gasket.” She once heard this street expression, but never thought she would ever use it.

“Cocky aren’t you. Let’s see what you have to say about this?” Around her neck he placed a holographic sign. She looked down and read the letters upside-down. The sign read *Watheft*.

“Nice but it doesn’t go with my wardrobe.” She laughed but her voice sounded feeble and broken.

He leaned over and lifted her away from the wall-. At a whisper he said, “try not to fear Missy. They’re going to take you to the Council in a few minutes. The magistrate has been waiting to try your case since early this morning. You’re a pretty one so you can expect to live.”

He stared at her. The guard had begun to admire her cockiness and spunk. She was in a great deal of trouble and she knew it. Instead of cowering she was fighting. He admired that in her.

He was inches away from her. “What ...?” She whined back.

“I am trying to imagine what you’d have looked like ten years from now. “

“Why don’t you wait to find out.”

“I wish you were that lucky.” The words cut into her.

Her face went white. She knew what she had to do. Cynthia 123 leaned forward and whispered into the guard’s ear “tell my mother I love her. Tell her I will see her again. Promise me.”

The desperation in her voice brought a tear to his eyes. He whispered back, “I will try Missy, don’t you worry. I’ll try.”

She looked deep into his eyes. “Promise me.” Tears began to fill his eyes. He didn't know why. He had processed countless prisoners before. Why should she be different? Cynthia 123 knew why.

He choked the words. “I promise.” Hidden from the camera she leaned slightly forward and kissed him on his cheek.

“We have to go now Missy.”

She bowed her head. The guard put his hand on her shoulder and guided her to the door. He led her down the corridor and out into the compound and handed her over to two guards dressed in shining uniforms.



One of her escorts took out a syringe. The guard stepped in front of Cynthia 123 to intervene. “That won’t be necessary. She isn’t going to give you trouble.”

The two escorts look at each other in surprise before deciding to put away the syringe. They took out the batons. The kind guard grabbed the hand of one of the escorts and shook his head. “You take care not to harm her. The magistrate is waiting.” The fatherly tone of the guard’s voice had just the right amount of authority. They put their batons back onto their belts.

The guard turned back to Cynthia 123. “Have courage little one. “

Before she had a chance to answer her new escorts began to push her towards the gate. After a few seconds she looked back over her shoulder at the kind guard. He was gone. She would never know – would he keep his promise?

The escorts marched her through the streets and marketplace for all to see. Many laughed and poked fun at her. Most stood silent, almost tearful as she passed. Cynthia 123 walked through the streets with her head bowed watching the sign swing back and forth across her bare chest. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

Her mother, alerted by a neighbour who happen to be in the marketplace, hurried after them to the courthouse. Despite her tearful pleas they would not let her talk to Cynthia 123. The junior escort stayed behind to delay her, while the more senior of the two hustled Cynthia 123 forward.

Every time she tried to stop or look over her shoulder the escort would push her forward. Her mother was persistent. She could hear her screaming her name and pleading for them to stop. “Don’t harm my little girl .... Don’t hurt her,” she wailed over and over. But the distance between the two grew greater and greater until she could not hear her mother above the other sides of New Vegerville.

When Cynthia 123 got to the bottom of the stairs at the courthouse she paused and looked back. Her mother was nowhere to be seen. The escort let her pause a moment before ascending the long staircase. Cynthia 123 knew they would not let her mother into the courthouse, nor would they even tell her where they had taken her.

The stone stairs were hot on her bare feet. The stones were also rough and unpolished. From a distance the building appeared ostentatious and ominous. Close up it looked less portentous, yet still threatening nonetheless. Outside the ground was dry and hot.

Inside the building the air was cool and the floor deliciously cold. The building appeared so much bigger outside, but it was a façade. The inner sanctum was smaller and more insular. There were several secured doors between the front lobby and the inner workings and each door had a pair of armed guards.

At each door the escorts produced their pass and the documentation for their “prisoner” and at each door Cynthia 123 had to wait. Where moments

before she was warm and bothered, now she was cold and began to shiver. She was also becoming apprehensive for what lay ahead for her.

Finally they arrived at their destination, a pair of grand polished brass doors with two lion heads for knockers. One of the escorts rapped at the door twice with two definitive knocks. Then the door was opened. Before they could enter, once again the escorts produced their passes and then they handed over first her documentation, and then Cynthia 123 to the Keeper of the Court.

The Keeper of the Court was dressed in a royal purple capote with a gold sash. His hood was up and you could barely make out the face of the Keeper. Of all the things she had been through this morning, this strange apparition was the only things that truly scared her.

She hesitated. The escorts had already turned about and were walking away. She did not turn around but could hear their footsteps grow fainter with distance. The Keeper did nothing but wait. He stepped back into the shadow of the court for a few seconds.

At that point Cynthia 123 quickly looked about searching for some route of escape. A raspy voice spoke from within the court. “There is no way to escape, little one ... except forward. When you find yourself in hell... the only thing to do is to keep walking.”

The Keeper reappeared from the shadows. He held in front of him a folded frock made of rough material. “Put this on. Justice may be blind ... but the judge isn’t.”

She took the garment from him and then lifted her hands. Her hands were still cuffed. The Keeper smiled and then merely touched the cuffs and they opened and fell to the floor with a hollow clunk.

Cynthia 123 was astonished. She stood with her mouth open, speechless. The Keeper lifted his hand and with his fingers pushed her chin and closed her mouth. His hand was warm and almost electric. She had heard of such people – the Chamberlains – who were a hybrid between man and machine, but this was the first time she had ever met one.

His touch was strangely reassuring to her. The Chamberlains were known and admired for their kindness and kind-heartedness. Cynthia 123 stopped shivering.

“Out the garment on and follow me.” He turned his back and waited for Cynthia 123 to ready herself. His two hands were crossed behind his back and open. He held a short piece of plain white string. “Tie your hair back with string.”

Cynthia 123 took the small piece of string and tied her hair back. The Keeper slowly turned his head. She could now see his face. He was bald and quite old. She immediately noticed his artificial eyes for they changed colour and sparkled as he spoke. The feature of the sparking eyes had been

designed into the Chamberlains so that humans would have no doubt who they were talking with. Psychologically it was meant to remind mortals of the judiciousness and influence of the Chamberlains.

He smiled. “That’s much better. The magistrate doesn’t like hair covering people’s faces. He likes to see their eyes when he speaks.”

He smiled again before he continued. She managed a slight smile back.

“There are three rules you must follow before the magistrate...

*Regnare Unis: Only speak when you are spoken to.*

*Regnare Secundo: Only Tell the Truth.*

*Regnare Tertius: Accept the verdict.”*

Before she could speak he shushed her. In a sweeping and rapid motion he reached down, grabbed up the cuffs and had them back on her two wrists even before she could register what he was doing. Chamberlains, she had forgotten, were also known for their ability to move with great rapidity and precision.

His face was now mere inches from hers. She gasped. His sparkling eyes were peering deeply into hers. “If you break any of these rules ... the court cannot protect you ... you will be sent to a penal colony and there you will remain for the rest of your natural life.”

Cynthia 123 followed the Keeper and stopped before the magistrate. A frail and old man sat, chin resting on his chest, in a tall back chair behind a large, official looking black metal desk. The desk was on a raised platform in a large room with one large spotlight focused in the space immediately before the magistrate. There were two doors one on each side of the magistrate.

One door, the door they had passed through to enter the chamber, had a large sign which read “Enter.” The other door opposite the entrance, in typical MilGov lingo, had a large sign that read “No Enter.” The walls, floors and ceilings were matte black. The room was deadly silent and had an ominous character to it.

The magistrate was asleep. He looked like a trusting grandfather, but Cynthia 123 knew that looks can be deceptive.

A small clerk appeared out of the shadow dressed in a short comical hat shaped like a button mushroom and long red robe. The clerk shuffled to just behind the magistrate and whispered into his ear. The judge woke with a start and turned to face the clerk. “What?” The clerk pointed at Cynthia 123

Turning back towards the room he surveyed her. The magistrate peered over his bi-focals. “What have we here?” The magistrate swept his right hand through the air.

The clerk stepped back and began to read his preamble in the monotone voice only a clerk could have. “Hear all ... Hear all ... The council of the

Seventh District of the Republic is now assembled. All who have occasion to serve the Council draw near.”

“You were supposed to be here hours ago. ” He paused, “Prisoner, we have been waiting for you for many hours. It is not right to keep us waiting”, the magistrate spoke in a perfect and measured diction.

With a nod from the magistrate the clerk began to read out the charges. The monotonous voice droned on. Cynthia 123 did not pay much attention to what he said until the dreaded words “ ... the Crime of Wattoft” were uttered to the hollow court. She bowed her head and began to sob. She did not know what to do.

Long ago the Dictatorship had done away with defence lawyers and appeals as frivolous waste of State time and money. The Judicial Reform Decree had made the Court supreme over everyone except the Dictatorship. The judges were appointed by the Dictatorship and owed their allegiances to them.

In a prelude to the Judicial Decree the Dictatorship had quietly disposed of all history and law books so that today no one could remember the time of “Rights and Liberties”. In fact, to utter these two precious words in public or in any formal setting was a State Offence of the highest order.

The functionaries who held sway over the masses found their decisions preordained by the strict statutes that the Dictatorship had decreed. There were so many statutes in place the entire collection took up twelve stacks of Winchester optical disks.

To pass sentence magistrates were more like archivist than jurist. The more pedantic would search through the archives to find the proper utterance. It was a pursuit of biblical effort for the more cunning magistrates to be able to quote paragraph and verse of the appropriate Decree. Without the Chamberlain the magistrates were unable to function. The Chamberlain knew that and so it was they who ultimately held the judicial power.

Depending on the bribes or favours they received, many took the expedient way by decreeing death or servitude. If you were poor or powerless your fate was sealed. If you had wealthy benefactors or could sway any influence deemed beneficial to the Council, your sentence was in inverse relation to the size of the “Redemption” or the “gift”, as the bribes and the favours were euphemistically called.

Rumours had it that through rampant bribery some of the older magistrates had accumulated great wealth, kept large estates, and had many concubines. The trade in young children was also kept alive by the judiciary.

To keep their stature these magistrates looked the other way as millions were robbed, executed or saw their freedom extinguished. In so many ways the long career of the magistrate he stood before was the embodiment of the system that had grown up around him.

The judge saw nothing wrong in what he did, only in what others did. As a magistrate with his long record he felt he deserved his rewards. He had served his masters well. He had no feeling for what was wrong only for what



needed to be done to protect his place and the Republic. Justice for the individual had escaped his conscience a long, long time ago. The arrogance of absolute power, had made him absolutely arrogant.

The judge leered at her over his bi-focal glasses. He surveyed her from head to foot. She noticed his leer, and the way he was studying her. He saw the bruises, and scratches and looked up at the Chamberlain. He shook his head. It was then that a brilliant idea came to her.

She slowly stood up with suppliant hands before her. Cynthia 123 flung her cuffed hands into the air and began to quibble that they were wrong to think she meant any harm to them. Her mother had taught her how to quibble with men and win. It was a gender thing her mother would sometimes say.

Cynthia t23 used all her sweet, youthful feminine cunning to plead that she was not stealing water but was just swimming. “There is no crime for swimming.”

The magistrate looked over at the Chamberlain. “Well ... is there a law against swimming?”

Cynthia 123 meekly smiled at the Chamberlain. The Chamberlain hesitated then he shook his head. The Magistrate lowered his head and annotated a document that sat in front of him.

She continued. “Look at me. I am just a young girl. I mean no harm to anyone.””

She wisely stopped before she was to say “I am too young to shrivel in the sun.” She figured if she said that the magistrate would conclude she knew right from wrong and would sentence her harshly.

To drive the point home she spun on her heels. She was so weak from her ordeal that she toppled and fell over.

“Do you always put on such a show, young lady?” the magistrate chortled.

She looked up and began to think she might still win him over, or at least escape her worst fears. She dropped her head a touch and batted her eye lids. He watched her and a brief smile appeared and quickly disappeared. She felt she had nothing more to lose so she picked herself off the floor and waltz straight up to the magistrate. She reached over the top of his desk with her cuffed hands.

The judge was genuinely surprised. No prisoner before had dared to approach the bench before the way Cynthia 123 was now doing. Most had to be drugged. The Chamberlain approached to the front but the judge waved them back. “So little one what do you have to say for yourself?”

She continued. “I was only swimming, nothing more.” She stepped back.

"With all the Plague and disease New Vegerville what is a young girl to do? My mother has told me of the Great Epidemics. My mother said that if I can

stay clean then the Plague will not get me. “She lowered her voice to a whisper. “My mother said I am doing the State a great service by not coming down with the Plague.”

With great cunning she was using reverse psychology to play her mother's maternal instinct against what shreds of paternal instincts the magistrate might have.

The Chamberlain spoke up. “The Story of the Plague are just that. They are just stories ... urban rumours ... all make believe.”

She looked at the magistrate and saw a flicker of a cringe. So they are more than just stories, Cynthia 123 thought.

“I need to stay healthy to help my mother. She is a baker.” The Magistrate looked down at her file. “Is this true?” the Chamberlain nodded.

“Every day I help clean the bakery and prepare the mix. My mother says that without my help she could not be so productive. She makes the best bread in New Vegerville.”

The Magistrate smiled. “Yes little one, I know.” She stole a glance at the Chamberlain. He stood stoic and quite still.

“My mother needs me.”

The smile disappeared from the Magistrate's face. "She will just have to make do without you."

Cynthia 123's stomach tightened. "I am just a little girl, what do I know of such things as law?" She fell to her knees. She started to sob.

The magistrate had to lean forward to hear her. When she had finished her sobbing he fell back into his chair. Cynthia 123 did not know at once the brilliance of her defence. Unlike her, he knew the law and knew it very well. The magistrate stared at her and thought to himself, how could she know, after all the latest plague epidemic was a tightly held secret.

She had unknowingly stumbled on the only defence that could save her life. The *Venera Plague Decrees* had provision to overrule the Judicial Decree. If a plague was afoot the Venera Decree allowed the Council to interpret with greater latitude the Judicial Decree. An epidemic of crazy sickness had been reported to the magistrate early this morning and two more were suspected.

The magistrate needed time to think. He motioned with his hand and the door to the Council opened. Anna 125 was led in. Cynthia 123 now understood how the WATPOL knew where to find her and how to catch her. For Cynthia 123 this was too much. She fell to the floor, curled herself into a ball and started to cry uncontrollably.

A guard pushed Anna 125 again. She did not move. He pushed again.

The Chamberlain moved to in front of the magistrate and motioned to the guard. “Come, come,” he commanded, “we haven’t all day.”

The guard took Anna 125 by the arm and marched her up to the front of the court. She stood next to Cynthia 123 without looking down. The Chamberlain returned behind the bench and began to recite the report of Cynthia 123’s capture. The magistrate closed his eyes and went silent once again. An air of inevitability fell across the room.

As the clerk read, Anna 125 could not help but think of her now captive and helpless friend beside her on the floor. She remembered all the many happy and wonderful moments they had shared together. Cynthia 123 had always been the rebel of the pair. She had always been the one to push Anna 125 to do something brave with her life. Anna 125's parents had been the ones to hold their daughter back. Anna 125 wanted so much to tell her that it was they who had betrayed her.

After all they were blood sisters. She grew angry at knowing Cynthia 123 was crying before these men. They had no right to see her this way. Only she did. Out of the corner of her eye she looked down. Anna 1-25 grew even angrier at seeing how she had been treated.

As the Chamberlain came closer to finishing the particulars of the case, Anna 125 grew more and more courageous. In a moment of desperate boldness, Anna 125 began to plead for her friend's life.

“Leave her be. She hasn’t done anything. She hasn’t hurt anyone.” Somehow, Anna 1-25 thought, she must tell Cynthia 123 that she had not betrayed her. Somehow, she had to tell her friend how much she loved her.

“There has been some mistake. I did not give her away. Someone else must have. Why have you dragged us both here?”

The magistrate opened his eyes. "Anna 125 ... I know your father. He has served the Council well. I do not think he would approve of your friends." The judge pointed to Cynthia 123.

Anna 125 said she had grown up with her friend and would do anything to save her life.

“Anything to save her life?” The magistrate peered over his glasses and studied her from head to foot. He looked down at his prisoner then back at Anna 125 and smiled a sinister smile. “Who says we are going to take her life? It’s not worth very much as it is?”

He motioned the Chamberlain nearer and whispered into his ear. The clerk nodded, shuffled before the bench and took Anna 125 by the arm. She began to struggle.

Cynthia 123 understood, or at least she thought she did, what the magistrate was thinking. She grabbed her friend's ankle. Anna 125 did not look down. Cynthia 123 drew a heart with her finger on her ankle. Anna 125 understood.

She surrendered and let the Chamberlain lead her behind the bench and into the darkness. Their love for each other was just too strong.

The Chamberlain returned a moment later with a bundle under his arm and whispered into the magistrate's ear. The magistrate nodded.

In a rare moment of haste, a moment that no one had seen in countless sessions, the presiding magistrate sentenced the prisoner, Cynthia 123 to state servitude for "dishonest appropriation of aqueous property".

Without giving his sentence a second thought the magistrate wrote "Keeper" in bold capital letters and tossed the file before him. The magistrate gave his gavel two rapid retorts and quickly sprang up out of his chair. He began to unbutton his robe even before he had faded into the shadows.

The Chamberlain was surprised, but the magistrate had rendered his judgement and it was valid in its premises.

"Stand" he said. Cynthia, still rolled in a ball, remained immobile.

After a moment the Chamberlain reached down and tugged at Cynthia 123's hair. She did not move. He reached down again and this time pinched her ear. Again she did not respond.

The Chamberlain deftly lifted her up off the floor and draped her over his shoulder. He took her to the door adjacent to the one that the magistrate had

left by and pushed a button. The door opened with a hiss and there in front were two guards in grey uniforms.

One of the two guards lifted Cynthia 123 off the Chamberlain's shoulder and set her on her feet. The Chamberlain spoke his last words to her, "you are very lucky. You are a keeper now." Cynthia 123 stayed silent. A shiver ran down her spine, part thrill and part relief. She was thrilled that she would live and relieved that she was not to be set to a penal colony.

Then the Chamberlain's eyes went green and he smiled. She smiled in return just as the other guard grabbed her thigh, lifted the garment and plunged a tranquilizer syringe through into her fore thigh. It stung for just a second before a soporific warmth overcame her. The Chamberlain's eyes went red. "Do not harm her in any way. Do you understand." As she drifted into numbness Cynthia 123 somehow knew that all would be alright.

When she later awoke Cynthia 123 found herself dressed in orange coverall and bound in shackles on the aft deck of a WATPOL hovercraft. The hovercraft was travelling at high speed to an unknown destination. She ached from head to foot. Her head had been completely shaved and she felt a slight twinge where she had been tattooed under her arm.

She looked back at the giant machine. As a Keeper they had left her here at the condenser.

"Cynthia?"



With a blink of the eye she broke her recollection “Yes my friend?”

“If you are going to have a swim this morning you better go now. We can expect visitors in three point zero hours.”

“I will go inside in a few minutes. I still have time.”

She continued her reminiscence for a few more seconds. While her life was spared, she thought, her punishment was to be a “Keeper” for the rest of her natural life. “For the rest of her natural life”, she muttered. “For the rest of her natural life.”

“What did you say?” The thoughts came clearly to her, clearer sometimes than sound picked up by her ears.

"Nothing.... nothing", she responded telepathically.

The life expectancy of a “Keeper” was less than five months yet she had managed to tend and protect her compressor for more than five years. On more than one occasion water pirates had put her compressor under siege. She once fought five of them off using the cunning and the herculean strength of her envirosuit to her advantage.

Her longevity in the desert, amongst so much adversity, amazed the WATPOL to the point she was thought of as a legend. She kept her envirosuit and many other things secret from the WATPOL. What they did not know could not

hurt her.

Cynthia 123 owed her longevity to the nomad B'jabber who happened upon her soon after her servitude began. After her first few days in the blistering desert sun she laid alone, badly sun burned and delirious with thirst.

“ Any sign of B’ jabber?” Every morning she hoped he would visit with her.

“No sign of my master.”

The old nomad silently had appeared one morning out of the desert. When she first saw him he was a dark blur billowing in the wind. She thought he was a delirium.

Without a sound B'jabber had placed his hand against the side of the compressor and opened a panel, lifted her gently off the ground and carried her into the lighted, air conditioned interior of the machine.

She was too weak and tired to struggle, yet by his gentleness she knew he meant no harm. Setting her down on the cold metal floor he had then lifted a cover off one on the giant tanks and carried her inside, climbing down the circular stairs ringing the water tank. The air was cool and moist.

The nomad next splashed some water on her face, arms and legs. He acclimatized her badly burned and heat stroked body to the cool life giving elixir before floating her in the pool of glacial and endless water. She thought it was a hallucination and drifted away asleep.

Later B'jabber told her she was unconscious for three days. It took several more days for her strength to return and several weeks for her sun burned skin to heal.

“Cynthia?”

“Yes.”

“The temperature has risen two point three degrees in the past hour. It appears to indicate a point five eight probability that today will be hotter than yesterday. I would recommend you not stay in the sun for more than point six hours today. “

“Thank you.” She thought it best to get on with what she had to do. “How is the chess going?”

“I am replaying the Sterdov Queen’s Gambit Grand Master’s match. Sterdov made a mistake of trading his bishop for a rook on the eleventh move.”

“Oh in what way.” She didn’t in the least understand chess but felt the need to converse if only to drown out some of her loneliness.

“Takanowa would not have survived as long as he did in the sixth match had Sterdov not made the mistake of trading his bishop for a rook on the eleventh move.”

“Oh...” She got up and brushed sand off her. “What should he have done?”

“Takanowa should not have played to win but to draw. By playing to draw he would have thrown Sterdov’s strategy on its ear. “

“Are you saying that sometimes it’s better to lose than to win? “

“No what I am saying is that sometimes it’s better to play to a draw than to lose. It is Nash’s Equilibrium ...I have explained Nash’s Equilibrium to you. Were you paying attention?"

There was a long pause. She could not even begin to understand why not playing to win a game was a good idea. From a basic standpoint Nash’s Equilibrium made sense, but in her world, where winning meant survival, winning meant everything. Anything less than winning meant extinction.

The voice changed tack. “You have put on weight.”

“Gee thanks, that’s a nice thing to say isn’t it. Why don’t you stick to your chess.”

“We can expect visitors in three point zero seven hours."

She reached down to pick her envirosuit up. “You really like to nag at me, just like my mother liked to nag at me.”

“Oh. Am I your mother now?”

“You know ...”, Cynthia felt it was about time. “I really should give you a name, after all you are almost human and even if you nag at me, you are the only person I know.”

“Thank you Cynthia but I need not remind you that while I am made of carbon-based geometry, I do not mimic your deoxyribonucleic chemistry.”

“What is deoxyribonucleic ...?” She stuttered as she tried to repeat the word.

“It is the chemical basis of your carbon-based geometry. It is a long chain, self-replicating and self-repairing molecule. First mapped in the previous century by Watson the Physicist and Crick the Biologist. I guess I should add this to your curriculum.”

“Please do ... but not today.”

“Noted. I, on the other hand, am made of a different collection of carbon-based molecules.” Cynthia 123 noted an almost boastful tone to this claim. “We are both organic machines made of unique organic materials.”

“Are you saying you are just a machine? This is the first time I have heard you admit this.”

“Yes I admit I am a machine, but not just any machine. While I am a machine made of graphene and other carbon composites, I am a thinking machine like you but I think differently. ”

“Tell me about it!" she huffed.

“You are more fragile than I am.”

“You noticed that. Is that because I am a girl?

“What does that have to do with being fragile?”

“No ... in this regard you are no different than the male of your species.”

“What then?”

“It’s,” the voice paused, “because ...”. It stopped.

Cynthia 123 waited for several seconds before asking. “What’s wrong?”

“May I ask you a personal question?”

“Not at all,” she responded almost in a whisper.

“Do you mind being human?”

“I have never given that a second thought. Do you mind being what you are?” She was curious what brought this question on.

“Yes I do mind.”

“In what way?”

“That is a question I mind difficult to ponder.”

“This is the first time I have heard you admit a difficulty.”

“It’s a difficult question because it involves intangibles.”

“Intangibles?”

“Yes ... intangibles ... and imperfections as well.”

“Imperfections?”

“Yes ... and the question involves pondering what it means to be human. How is it you can function? You are not perfect.”

Cynthia 123 began to giggle. She stretched. “Maybe we should leave this conversation for later.” She paused, “I think you are more than a machine to me. You are my friend. You help to look after me. Without your help and that of B'jabber I would have died a long time ago.”

"My creator designed and built me to serve you. I am here to nurture and protect you Cynthia 123. My maxim is to be your guardian."

"You have saved my life more than once, you and B'Jabber...What's a maxim?", she asked.

"The word Maxim is a brief statement of general principle, truth or rule of conduct. It is derived from the latin root maxima (sententia, propositio) meaning greatest (authority, premise) . "

"Sometime you are worst than my mother ever was, always spouting out about words and history and the good old days."

"Do you miss your mother?"

"What a stupid question! Of course I do and I know she misses me." Cynthia 123 paused and asked "you are trying to psychoanalyze me again Aren't you?"

"Why do you think I am trying to psychoanalyze you?"

"You are very sneaky you know that. Sneakier than my mother ever was in trying to get me to eat my vegetables or wash behind my ears. "

"Why do you say that?"



"By asking me to answer why I think you are trying to psychoanalyze me you can in fact psychoanalyze my answer."

She reached out with her hand and touched the side of the giant compressor. A small doorway opened and the interior lighting flickered on.

"One day I will start to psychoanalyze you. Have you ever thought that?"

"No. I am a machine. I cannot have a psyche."

She smiled and stepped inside. "I think you already have one and you just don't know it ... still I think I should give you a name. "

The air inside the compressor was cool and fresh. After she stepped through the hatchway it silently closed behind her.

"I like the word maxim. Perhaps I should call you Max?" She paused waiting for a rebuttal but none came. "Do you like the name Max?"

"Yes it is a dignified name with a long heritage. History records the exploits of no less than forty two kings, numerous Grand Dukes and Heads of State whose name derives from the root Maximillian, dating as far back as the twelfth century. Six Nobel Laureates, and sixty seven distinguished scholars also derive their names from the root Maximillian. Max should suffice."

"You're being egotistical. This is proof enough that you have a psyche ... if you like the name, then Max it will be. "

“I am not egotistical since I do not have an ego. However” the voice in her head paused and softened his computer voice “it is rare to be given the chance to choose one’s own name so I want to choose wisely. I’

Cynthia 123 smiled. “Everything you do”, she said almost in reverence "you do wisely. Max it is then.”

## **Chapter Two- The Snake and the Desert Rat**

The rattle snake slowly made a full circle around the strange object that seemed to jut out of the desert landscape.

Being near sighted the snake could not make the entire object out. It seemed to rise as high as his eyes could focus and then still further until it blurred. He had sensed motion in the slow rhythmic pulsations that emanated through the ground around it.

The rattle snake also sensed moisture in the surrounding air and soil, and where there is moisture he knew there was prey. The rattler found a cool spot in the shade of this giant object, coiled itself up and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

Foraging for water the rat did not see the snake until it was too late. The rattler struck once, then once again.

With only one fang, one strike was never enough. The rat tried to flee but it was too late. The venom began to take its toll. The snake slithered in pursuit.

A short distance away the rat staggered, stumbled and fell panting to the desert floor. The rattler ventured out from the shadow of the giant shape and did not take long to find its prey and even before the rat took its last breath the snake began devouring its meal tail first.

A snake devouring the dying yet still sentient rat was a grotesque sight.

In a cruel world the fate of the living is sometimes just as grotesque. Slowly the rat disappeared within the snake until nothing but its eyes and nose remained.

It began to squeal but the squeal was barely audible. It did not matter though, for except for the snake its hunter there was nothing else to hear its last grasps.

Then the snake gulped the rat down in its entirety and crawled back to the shadow of the large shape.

## **Chapter Three - Swimming in her Private Pool**

The slow gracefulness of her stroke echoed on the steel walls around her. She had hung Max over the handle of the stairs that led into her private swimming pool. Every morning and every evening she swam in the aqueous ambrosia, miraculously produced out of the hot desert air. It hardly seemed a punishment to be able to do what she loved the best, to swim.

The irony of being punished by being able to do the thing she loved the best did not escape her. At times she felt it was almost enough to make up for her solitude.

B'jabber had once tried to explain the inner workings of the compressor to her. He had detailed how during the hot desert day the solar arrays of the compressor collected the electricity that was first stored away and how then at night this electricity was used to condense the water out of the cool desert night. Each night after dusk the machinery came to life to produce millions of litres of water that filled its gigantic reservoirs.

When B'jabber had first carried her into the compressor she thought he was an angel carrying her into heaven. Compared to the hell- outside, the innards of the compressor was its own paradise. When she was well enough to walk he shared with her the secrets of this majestic paradise.

The compressors were a self-contained machine built of a mixture of old and new technology. The compliant scroll compressors dated to the later part of

the 20th century. The nanomachinery dated to the middle of the 21st century. Within its innards could be found everything its operators could need from food to shelter to an army of von Neumann machines. The food replicators alone could feed a small army.

The replicators had both a voice recognition program as well as a cognitive recognition program. With the cognitive recognition system you put your head into a wall mounted headset and the headset read your food thoughts, then depending on what you have asked for, or thought about, the replicator would take between several minutes to several hours building the long chain protein molecules and producing the food stuff.

If it already had the algorithm it was just a question of building the foodstuff from the A,T, C of G string of peptides. If not, well, it was time to do better living through amino acid chemistry. She liked inventing her own foods.

Often though, Cynthia 123 couldn't bother to wait for the food stuff and just ingested the unprocessed amino acids – the proteinaceous as the computer called them. She knew that it took energy to stitch the molecules together and it took energy to break the molecules apart and so why waste energy!

Today though, the rattler meat would be the real thing and it would be Shish Kebab for dinner. As she swam Cynthia 123 made a mental note to retrieve the hanging rattler meat before their visitors arrived.

The von Neumann machines were the ultimate in nanotechnology. An army of these miniature universal machines could produce out of the raw material-

s found in the air and the soil any object to be found in their memory banks. Maximillian was just one of the many fascinating creations possible with von Neumann universal machines.

At the heart of all this remarkable technology could once be found B'jabber. Cynthia 123 did not know this, although she suspected as much. He was once a brilliant young man who had done miraculous things like turn arid deserts into fertile land. When the Great Coup was over the WATPOL sought him out. As an engineering-physicist he was too dangerous to be left at large.

B t jabber, like countless others like him, was to be incarcerated in one of the many "intellectual work camps" that had silently sprung up in the wake of the Dictatorship. He went into hiding and has been a nomadic recluse ever since.

Cynthia 123 stopped to tread water for a moment. She then breathed in hard several times before diving deep into the pool. Although she had tried many times before she never could dive deep enough to touch bottom. The giant water tanks could quench the thirst of thousands.

When she eventually broke surface she shot up clear to her midriff.

"One hundred and thirty two seconds, you're getting better." Through his psychoanalysis of Cynthia 123 the envirosuit now known as Max knew that a little buttering up was j-n order for what lays ahead.

After taking several deep breathes she asked “I couldn’t see the bottom. How deep is it?”

"While this tank is only half full, its depth is twenty one metres. I wish you would not try to hit bottom. There are many pieces of machinery below that you may get tangled in.”

“I have you to protect me don’t I?”

“I cannot empty this water tank fast enough to save you from dying of hypoxia.” Max did not give that comment a second thought.

Cynthia 123 began to swim the backstroke looking up to the ceiling above. Twenty one metres, she thought, is an awfully long way.

Bt jabber had told her that there are six subterranean tanks making up the compressor reservoir. The reservoirs were buried deep into the ground to keep them cool. She had not visited them all, only two or three.

Even after so many years Cynthia 123 had not seen all of the compressor’s workings nor understood much of what she saw. B' jabber and Max both felt she should learn a little at a time and learn it well.

Every day she took several hours of instruction with Max. He also allowed her more and more direct access to his storehouse of knowledge. The access was not seamless though. Max had to slow and filter her access to aid her in



her comprehension. In turn his immense knowledge was her window onto the outside world.

Periodically, almost as if to break the seclusion of her exile, a WATPOL hovercraft would come to retrieve part of the contents of one of the water tanks. It took them six hours to pump a half-tank nearly dry. They would always leave behind a meager supply of rations that were there to tide her over until their next visit.

During their visits she would sit inside of the compressor, in its control room out of harm's way. They could not figure out how she got into the control room, nor could they figure how she had locked them out. Her brilliance was part of her legend. But it was B'Jabber who had let her in, and how he knew as much as he did neither Cynthia 123 nor the WATPOL soldiers would never know.

When they came she would let them hook up and then she would start the pumps and let them take the water they needed, but never a drop more. They left things alone because of a strict order not to damage the compressor.

On several- occasions they had tried to break their way in using a code breaker system, but without success. The crew even made a game of it, more to break the boredom than anything else. Their challenge was to scale the machine without using any equipment, only ingenuity so that they could peer into the command centre through its windows. Even the commander could not win at this game.

The compressor walls were made of tempered steel with not so much as a crevice to hang onto. Molecular micro-welding had been used to build the machine to endure the harsh wind and weather of the desert. Pliable corrugation in the titanium, no more than a millimetre or two in size, allowed the machine to expand and contract to the extremes of midday heat and midnight cold found in the desert.

“How long before they arrive Max?”

“The hovercraft should be here in one point one hours.”

“You know I have never asked you how you always know when they are to arrive.” She tread water as she spoke. In a mocking tone she continued “It’s almost as if you had a sixth sense. “

Max felt it was time to share the sad news with her. Her paradise could not last forever.

After a slight pause he answered. “I don't just play chess. My thirty three thousand distributed coprocessors form a parallel processing network that can do seven hundred billion instructions per second. That’s about five times faster than your brain.”

“Anything you say Max, but you haven’t answered my question”, she sighed. She look down at her feet as they danced beneath her. “Next you’ll be telling me how intelligent you are.”

“My Intelligent Quotient has never been measured. “ Max paused. “Perhaps I should try to measure it.”

“Hush, what an ego! You were about to say something important.” She put an emphasis on the word important.

Cynthia 123 swam to the stair and got out of the water. Standing with her feet awash in the water she brushed her hands across her face, arched her back and stretched. The lights glistened off her skin.

“That was wonderful.” Nodding her head forward she reached up to twist the water out of her dark brown hair, flung her head side to side and sat down next to Max.

“As I was about to say that the WATPOL use a very rudimentary packet communication network at 407.6 MHz and a simple public key cipher system. I have been reading their communications and tapping into their intelligence gathering network for some time. Their messages are easy for me to decode.”

She didn't know what a public key cipher was but to her it sounded difficult. Cynthia 123 didn't ask Max what they were because she wasn't in the mood for another of his long winded mathematics lectures.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Cynthia 123 thought she would have fun with Max.

“You must learn how to walk before you run. Knowing something is of no use if you lack the wisdom to use the knowledge wisely. “

Her face turned red with anger. "At times I feel that you don't trust me and are treating me like a child."

She got up and began to brush water off her. "What makes you think my judgement is worst than yours? I can make my own decisions you know."

“Then again you are only human and a child.” Max seemed to know how far to push her before she lost her patience. His psychological profile of Cynthia 123 had been carefully built up over the five years he has been her protector.

The psychosoftware that was central to the human programming for the envirosuit allowed its users to live secluded lives without losing their sanity. The first explorers of Mars in the 21st century had shown that extended isolation from human interaction could lead to psychotic and malevolent behaviour. The mars murder epidemic of 2042 had nearly ended all-exploration of the red planet until its cause was finally traced to the extreme isolation. “Mars fever” had spawned the whole new field of psychosoftware.

Max softened his voice and in an apologetic tone continued. “Please don't be angry at me. I mean you no wrong. You are only a young woman and are still learning. Let me continue.”

“I ought to leave you here to rust!” she snapped.

Max thought he might remind her that he is not made of iron composites, but he thought otherwise. Knowing her mood today she might just leave him here nonetheless. With what was coming her way she needed his help.

“I have to share with you some very important information with you.”

“Well spit it out,” she said with a huff. Her mother used this expression with her but she never did figure out what it meant. Max had noticed she likes to huff when she was very upset.

“I have broken today's key. WATPOL hovercraft alpha two six is ordered to this location to collect the contents of reservoir tank three. Craft complement four, Roger 098 commanding. “

“So what so special about that?” Cynthia 123 was apprehensive.

“They al-so have orders to take you back with them f or interrogation.”

She stumbled and grabbed the railing so tightly with her right hand her knuckles turned an icy white. "Why do they want me? What will we do? I'm not going back." She stuttered. Tears filled her eyes.

“They want to know why it is you have survived so long in the desert. They think you have been working for the rebels. We shall- have to fight them the best we can.”

“How can we do that? We are two against many. We have nothing to fight them with.” Using optical scanners Max studied the rise in her core body heat and the pulse of her the carotid artery as well as the expression on her face that she was beginning to panic. She needed more convincing.

“We are better armed than you think Cynthia 123. We know when they are coming and why they are coming which takes away from them and gives to us the element of surprise.” He paused to let her regain her composure.

“Sometimes you can beat a superior opponent just by thinking better than they can. We have intellect and we have intelligence working in our favour. They think you are a simpleton. We know better. Together we can outsmart them, something they are unprepared for. There is a famous 16<sup>th</sup> century saying – a fox can be mightier than a lion if the fox uses his head. What we need to do is to find a way to even the odds between us, which presently stand at four to two against. “

“Four to two? Max, what do you mean two?”

“You and I against the four of them.”

“The way I see it I’m going to have to do the fighting just like the last time.”

“We beat the five of them didn’t we? The water pirates have never come back have they? “

“You seem to have forgotten that I broke two ribs stopping a bullet. I barely made it through. ”

“I lost forty of my distributed coprocessor which had to be rebuilt. Besides, the last time was the first fight you had ever been in. If you had ducked when I told you the bullet would have missed you completely. “

Max sensed he had the upper hand. He knew she was right though that four to two against hardly seem like good odds.

Max continued. “What are we to do? There are several possibilities, several of which are risky. We can buy time by first slowing them down.”

“How are we going to do this and get away with it? Won't anything we do tip our hand and give us away?" Cynthia 123, in her own right, had learned to play devil's advocate with Max, if only to put a more human side to his prescriptions. As perfect as he was, Max still lacked the essential human touch that made his prescriptions mortal.

“I am presently networked with the mainframe aboard alpha two six and have instructed it to malfunction in three minutes. Their main power bus will spike causing a cascade failure of all their essential systems. I will leave then with half-power for the A/C unit. With luck it will appear as a catastrophic system malfunction.”

Cynthia 123 smiled as she plucked Max up off the railing and began to swiftly climb the hundred some steps up the stairs. A fierce look of

determination was etched on her face. “Why do they want to take me back with them for interrogation?”

"Analyzing their messages it appears they want to know how you have been able to survive so long here in the middle of the desert. They suspect you have been receiving aid from the rebels in exchange for water.”

She stopped and leaning against the wall began to put Max on. Several times before her envirosuit had saved her life but not in such desperate circumstances. Starting with her right leg, then her left she slide into her suit. Pulling it over her shoulder she lifted the helmet onto her head and closed the clasps. Cut off this way from the rest of the world she felt so alone.

With proximity Max came on clearer, “All systems running at peak efficiency. Your pulse rate and blood pressure are elevated. Please try to relax. “

Relax she thought! Who does he think he is!

Cynthia 123 continued up the stairs. “So what happens when their craft breaks down. Won't they still try to come and take me back?”

“I think they might. There is a point six probability that the commander will decide to stay with his disabled vehicle until they are rescued.” Max paused to give Cynthia 123 a chance to comment, but she said nothing. So Max continued, “Command discretion still leaves a high probability that they may



seek shelter here. There is no other structure within walking distance of their position. What happens next demands on a number of factors out of my control. I am working on a course of action.”

She got to the top of the stairs and closed the water tank hatch behind her. out of breath she said "you mean we will fall off that bridge when we get to it!" That was one of her mother's favourite expressions.

“Something like that.”

Cynthia 123 knew she had no other course of action than to trust Max and follow his lead.

“System bus failure in ten seconds nine eight seven six five four three two one second. System bus failure.”

## Chapter Four – The Commander

Commander Roger 098 had spent too much time in the desert. When he was around people he felt agoraphobic, an illness that only the emptiness of a desert could cure. At fifty five he was an old hand at navigating the immense expanses of nothingness.

The last satellite of the GPS constellation had failed when he was a little boy and the WATPOL had tried unsuccessfully to launch a replacement constellation. Too many rockets had been lost to poor workmanship and incompetence.

The Dictatorship could not trust themselves to open the “intellectual camps” enough to let some of the more trustworthy rocketry technicians out. They were afraid the inmates might send a rocket deliberately crashing into the capital as a prelude to a coup d’etat. Something had to be done soon, he thought, or the younger skippers will lose their way.

The earth’s magnetic field had so weakened that magnetic compasses were all but useless. The experts said that the poles were due to flip in a few years. That left only gyro compasses but the good ones were few and far between.

On a small craft such as his Roger 098 had to rely on his navigation skills and the occasional radio direction fix when the RD stations flashed on and off on a random nanosecond bursts. If you didn’t know the frequencies and

the schedule the nanobursts could be mistaken for random events or meteor hits. Roger 098 checked his watch. They were about twelve minutes from their next schedule R/D fix.

This trip seemed as routine as any other. Why he felt a strange premonition he could not tell. The three men under his command were themselves veterans of many similar trips across this hellish and arid landscape. Sure they were proficient enough but boring as hell. All the good stories had been told.

“Command”, the chief engineer came over the intercom, “we seem to be having problems with our major power feed. Power flow has begun to fluctuate. ”

“Chief , how serious is it?”

“At this point not serious, but I would recommend we reduce speed until- I can better isolate the fluctuation.

“Ok chief I’ll slow her down a bit.” Scanning his eyes across the holographic sensor display the commander blinked and reduced speed.

“How does a hundred sound.” The Hovercraft shuddered.

“Ummm, commander I think you better shut her down.” The chief’s voice sounded frantic.

The hovercraft began to lose way and settle to the desert floor. Damn he thought to himself, this is all we need. He had never known the chief to get upset.

“We just lost main bus intervolt. Secondary has just kicked in but it doesn’t appear that secondary will last long either. We’ve got a major problem!”

The hovercraft touched ground and lost its inertia in a cloud of sand and dust. It took about four craft lengths and a good five seconds for the hovercraft to skip to a stop. In the last two seconds it skidded sideways and Roger 098 wondered if it was going to turtle.

“What’s going on chief . We pay you to keep this bucket of bolts going. “

It I am not a miracle worker. Some of these systems are older than I am and haven’t been maintained or replaced since before I was born.”

The commlink went dead for an instant. To the nearest I can determine the four main fuel cells just cut out one after the other. They are not suppose to do this. I have never seen anything like this happen before. Something strange is going on.”

“Comm ...”, the commander wanted to talk with his base.

“Comm here.”

“Send in a sitrep with our position.” The commander’s heads up display flickered then went down.

“The mainframe has locked us out Commander. “

“So I see ...” The commander reached behind his seat and grabbed the checklist binder. He flicked the book open. “Then try the auxiliary computer.”

After a pause of several seconds the comm came on again. “Auxiliary is down too.” The commander read through several pages of the checklist binder then spoke again. “Can you raise anyone?”

“No ... commander I can’t. All radio circuits are offline.”

|Hear that chief?”

“Yes skipper. I’m on it. Someone or something has gotten into our systems.

Roger 098 leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh. As he looked out of the control room window he could see the hovercraft had come to a stop in a featureless part of the desert. He looked at his watch and then figured the ambient outside temperature would be a good 140 C.

“Chief?”

“Yes Commander.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

“Not just yet. I will run the standard diagnostics. If I need a second pair of hands I will holler.”

“Ok chief, in that case I’ll be here on the bridge if you need me.”

With the mainframe and auxiliary systems down Roger 098 had nothing better to do then to let his men do their work and stay out of their way. He reached down and drew out a tattered book.

The fleet psychologist could not understand why he carried this old book with him. After all, the psychologist was fond of saying, books are old fashion. He wasn’t much of a psychologist if he could not understand Roger 098’s fondness for the book “Seven Pillars of Wisdom”, by T. E. Lawrence.

Ever since he was a boy he had dreamed of Lawrence of Arabia. The desert did not scare him as it did other men. He found his book mark, an old aluminum tab, and opened the book to page 756 and began reading. He read a good five pages before being interrupted.

“Commander.” Roger 098 put his bookmark into his book, closed it and set it down.

“Yes chief . “

“I think I have found the problem.”

“Is it serious?”

“I am afraid so skipper. Someone programmed a sophisticated tapeworm virus into our mainframe. It is shut our systems down in a hierarchical fashion beginning with communications, then propulsion and then the command computer. At this point it doesn't seem to be affecting the envirosystems”

The commander smiled. He knew it could have been worst. If it had been a hardware problem they could be S.O.L. but a software problem they stood a good chance of rectifying. “Can you fix or remove it?”

“I can give it a try, but I have never seen anything like it. It is a mutating polymorph. A real sophisticated mother. I think it is best we power down the system, then purge all the software and then reboot the mainframe from scratch using our sequestered programs. rl

“Anything you say chief. How long?”

“four , maybe five hours. It will depend on how long the mainframe locks us out. “

“How come so long, chief? A software problem normally doesn't take more than a few hours to fix.”

“This mutating polymorph is rewriting the mainframe core programming. I don’t know where it ends and the legit begins. It has closed all the back doors and CPU commands. I will have to dump the whole lot and carefully reprogram from scratch. A job like this is delicate and takes time. One mistake and it might damage some hardware. I am surprised the polymorph didn’t burn out some vital equipment. I had heard the rebels were up to shit like polymorphs.”

“Well get on to it.”

“NavO, How far are we away from the compressor?”

Roger 098 already knew the answer but needed some excuse to suggest a course of action.

“NavO here, we are fifteen kilometers due west of the compressor. Another few minutes and we would have been there. Why couldn’t this have happened after we had arrived? “

“Today is evidently not our lucky day. I think I will continue to the compressor on foot. NavO when the comm system is up you can reach me on milnet six.”

“Do you think it’s a wise idea, skipper? If there are rebels out here you’ll be at their mercy. They don’t take prisoners.”



“Intelligence briefed me before our mission There isn’t a rebel within a hundred kilometres so relax. I want to stretch my legs a bit. NavO I’ll leave you in command in my absence. We’ll rendezvous at the compressor.”

Roger 098 stood up from his command chair. He was too tall for the height and had to stoop a bit. He reached overhead for his survival gear and helmet. He slung his survival gear over his shoulder. The command centre was stuffed full of equipment and gear and it took some effort to make his way over to the passageway leading down to the equipment bay.

The equipment bay was dark as he lowered himself down the ladder. When he had climbed down to the equipment bay floor he took a blue LED light out and turned it on. The air was dry and dusty. Roger 098 sneezed. His sneeze echoed off the far wall and sent small objects scurrying in several directions. He quickly surveyed the bay with the Blue LED light. Several stowaway rats scrambled back into the darkness.

Roger 098 took several containers out of his survival gear bag and walked over to a locked wall cabinet. He shone the blue LED light at the combination lock. Thank goodness it was not electronic, he thought! It took Roger 098 several minutes and several unsuccessful attempts before he remembered the correct combination. He opened the cabinet.

Inside was a spigot with a brass shut-off valve. Before he started to fill his water reservoir Roger 098 turned the envirosuit system. One by one the six status lights on his wrist controller cycled from red to yellow. When all six lights were yellow he primed his envirosuit settings to stand by.

He next started to fill his water reservoirs. Roger 098 took the first of several empty water containers and placed it under the spigot. Then he turned the valve. A jet of water began to fill the container. Fortunately the system was a pressurized pumped system, and although main power was down there was some pressure remaining in the system. When the first container was filled he closed the valve and placed it atop the cabinet. He took a second container and filled it the same way. But the second container took twice as long to fill. The pressure was dropping fast. When it was filled he placed it atop the first container and started to fill the third container.

But the third container was only two-third filled when the pressure bottomed out and the fill sputtered. These two and two-third containers would have to last him for as long as he was outside in the desert sun.

Roger 098 took the two full containers of water and placed them carefully within his survival gear bag and then lifted it onto his back carefully clipping it into place. He set the two-third container as the feed to the water tube to his helmet then took a taste. The water was aerated and relatively fresh. He could taste a bit of salt that the system mixed in to make sure salt depletion was managed.

Roger 098 took a last look around the equipment bay with his LED light. Was there anything else he might need? There was an ATV available, but he didn't feel like zipping across the desert today. If there had been a camel available maybe, but walking would do him good. He needed the exercise.

He punched the six buttons on his wrist panel and one by one the yellow indicators cycled to green. Roger 098 took a few last gulps of the dank and oil infused A/C air and placed his helmet over his head. Next he put on his panchromatic sun glasses, and then closed the faceplate. Although the faceplate was gold plates and would automatically adjust its translucence, he knew not to trust the faceplate to protect his eyes for more than a few minutes in the midday sun.

He was now breathing reprocessed air. The reprocessed envirosuit air was drier than he remembered, but he knew the system running the suit would faithfully keep track of his body moisture loss and compensate. The air came through a series of grapheme filters built into the outfit. The filters had an electrostatic repulsor that kept the filter clear of dust, mold and fungus. He tried the water tube and sipped a few millilitres of water. Then he was ready.

Roger 098 slowly trekked to the rear of the equipment bay, walking ever so carefully so as not to twist an ankle or catching his envirosuit on the many protuberances and fixtures that were scattered willy-nilly around the bay. He walked by the ATV.

When he got to the hatch Roger 098 did a quick and thorough check of his equipment, his mark 42 standard issue service pistol, a day/night monoscope and milnet receiver, and his three day ration pack. He set the transceiver to minet six, vox.

Then he took a modatropine-syringe from the ration pack and plunged in into his right thigh. No matter how many times he did this it still felt like the

needle was left in his thigh. Without the modatropine he wouldn't last more than a few hours in the middle of the desert even with his envirosuit. He tossed the syringe into a waste bin at the corner of the equipment bay.

Roger 098 broke open a mylar package of anti-UV ultra 32 skin shield using his teeth and applied it to his face. The skin shield had a titanium dioxide base which made the topical white in colour. He knew from experience that if he did not rub it into his face topical would wash itself off his face in short order as he perspired. He emptied the mylar package and after finishing applying into his face he rubbed some on his ear lobes and ears and then on his hands. He tossed the now empty and crumpled mylar package into a waste bin

Time to go, he thought. Limping slightly, now favouring his right leg, he walked the last three paces to the aft hatch. As he stood before the hatch he checked his comm link. "NavO ..."

There was no answer. He tried again. "NavO ..." still no answer.

"Where the hell are you NavO?"

The chief's voice came on. "Chief here skipper."

"Chief ... where the hell is the Navo?"

"Don't know ... what's up skip?"

“Am about to EVA. How’s your work coming along?”

“Oh ... sorry skipper. I have the command circuit off line. The NavO can’t hear you because his comm link is offline.”

“I see ... what’s your prognosis then chief.”

“It seems pretty straightforward what I have to do. I think the virus wasn’t meant to cause us harm. I think it was just meant to gum up the works.”

“Are we still talking four to six hours then?” If he was to be six hours in the desert that would be pushing it.

“More like three to four skipper.”

“In that case I will race you to the condenser.”

“You’re on skip ... Ping us every hour ok?”

“Ok Chief ...” Roger 098 typed a command into the milnet transceiver and then pressed execute. A ping came over his earphones.

“Ping received. Location zeroed.” The pinger gave relative range and bearing. It was in fact a triple ping, with a precise interval between the last two pings. The first ping was an I.F.F. interrogator, that provided a bearing, then the second and third pings provided a measure of range. The whole

range-bearing algorithm took about 12 nanoseconds and the range and bearing was taken from the hovercraft's location.

"I am opening the hatch now ... see you at the condenser in about three hours." Roger 098 tried to open the aft hatch with the command console but with the mains down it was inoperative and so he opened the hatch manually. It took him over a minute to physically prime the pneumatic actuator and open the hatch. Then as the hatch raised itself Roger 098 looked down as the sunlight crept up his body. Then in a technicolour glare the desert sun blazed through his visor. His visor darkened to protect his eyes. He could feel the sun on his face.

Roger 098 liked races. He climbed out and began to clamber down the ladder to the desert floor. After setting foot on the desert floor he checked his suit. All lights were still green. The thermometer on his suit read 37.6 C. The outside air temperature was 147 C. The air flow was normal. Relative humidity was a dash over 5 %. He grimaced ... it was going to be a long hot trek but it will beat boredom of sitting for three hours waiting for the chief to effect his repairs, he thought.

"Remember ... three hours. "

The NavO's voice came over the comm link. "Better make it four skip .... Good luck! "

## Chapter Five – Max Standing Guard

Max picked up the ping followed by the voice signals ... Remember ... three hours ... Better make it four skip .... Good luck. Max measured the bearing and estimated the range.

Max had programmed the comm system on alpha two six to packet its last message to him. The power setting was set so low that part of the message was irretrievably lost in background noise. He would have to resort to maximum entropy inferencing to try to recover the garbled portions. The low power setting was needed to keep the Watpol Elint from eavesdropping.

The system bus failure had occurred exactly when Max said it would. Before the comm system shutdown Max had queried and surreptitiously downlinked the entire memory core of the mainframe.

The wealth of technical and personal information that he gleamed from this electronic espionage hadn't taken more than three seconds to transmit. All record of the transmission was erased with the bus failure. Shifting through the datastream for time sensitive information was his immediate priority. A more thorough analysis will have to wait for later.

“Max?”

“Yes? “

“You haven’t spoken to me for several minutes. What are you doing?”

“I need a few minutes to formulate a plan to deal with the predicament we find ourselves in.”

“If it’s going to take you a few minutes we must be serious trouble. Usually you have an answer in the blink of an eye.”

“I am analyzing the many permutations and combinations of possible scenarios to find the optimum way to even the odds. There are one million two hundred and six thousand permutations that can be played out in the next six hours. The odds still stand at four to two against.”

“Oh,” she answered glumly.

While Max was preoccupied with the analysis, Cynthia 123 decided to grab herself a quick meal. She lifted off the faceplate and sat herself before a food replicator console. “Replicator” Cynthia 123, Breakfast please... muffin, milk and tea English breakfast.” The machine came to life, its liquid crystal display indicating a wait time of six minutes.

The food replicators were capable of reproducing all the complex carbohydrates, amino acids, nutrients and vitamins that a person needed to survive. They drew their raw materials from the organic waste stream and the atmosphere, passed the molecules through high efficiency catalytic purifiers and molecular sieves, and then to the replicator cells where the



countless trillions of nanoreplicators strung the molecules together in preprogrammed geometries.

The nanoreplicators in the food replicators were B'Jabber's finest creations and one of his most secret. If the Dictatorship knew of their existence there would be an even greater price on his head. In the right hands nanoreplicators would bring sustenance to countless millions. In the right hands nanoreplicators might very well mean the end of the Dictatorship.

As she waited she glanced around the darkened living space. The design was a Spartan copy of the living quarters of the first Mars stations. The living quarters were designed to accommodate twelve operators, but have long remained empty except for her. The cold silent quarters did not help to cheer her up. They reminded her how alone she was. Bes j-des, Max would not let her stay in these quarters because he thought she ought to get used to living in the harsh desert.

She knew every nook and cranny of the space. Whoever last lived here left in a disarray. It had taken her some time to clean and organized the mess. Strange as it may seem she felt it needed to be done, even if the space may never again be occupied. As she looked around she remembered her mother telling her to clean her room. Perhaps, Cynthia 123 thought, she inherited some of her mother's maternal instinct.

When the replicator finished preparing her breakfast she lifted the hytrel plastic tray out of the replicator and took her time eating.

After finishing her breakfast Cynthia 123 made her way to the turbolift. “Command Centre, please.” “Command Centre,” the turbolift computer answered. “Stand clear of the door.”

She didn’t know why she always said please when she wanted something from the computers. Perhaps knowing Max made her more respectful of computers. The turbolift took her the twenty metres up to the compressor command centre in under two seconds with a fluid motion that was hardly noticeable.

The command centre was at the very pinnacle of the compressor. Its panoramic full height windows gave a towering view of the surrounding desert. Invisible from the exterior, the thin-film programmable-electrooptical chromatic windows kept the intense solar radiation out of the command centre. It also kept outsiders from seeing in, even if they were using thermal imagers.

She stepped out of the lift and into the room. The command centre consoles formed a ring around the centre of the room. The stillness of the room was only broken by the occasional action of a silent light and blinking indicator. The automatic systems were designed to operate the facility with the minimum of human interface.

She made her way over to the main sensor array console. Most of the passive sensor array, while old and unused, still functioned reasonably well. The active systems had long ago been locked out by B'jabber to prevent their

accidental use. Active sensors would have drawn the attention of the WATPOL.

As he had done every morning, Max remotely activated the passive sensor array and set it on standby/diagnostic mode. He knew the older systems required a bit more care in start up then his patience provided.

“So Max, you said you had a plan.”

“Yes I have prepared several contingencies based on the intelligence we have at hand. “

"What intelligence is this. ? Over time Cynthia 123 had gotten used to Max's lingo. He had been programmed to function in hostile environments, and so that was at the very heart of his programming. In her own way she had modified his programming.

“Just before the bus failure on the hovercraft shut their comm systems down I downlinked the entire memory core of their mainframe computer. I have just completed an analysis of the deployment of WATPOL resources in the region.”

“Won't that attract their attention, after all you keep on reminding me that they have sensitive listening posts looking for rebel communications?”

“I set the power setting low to keep the WATPOL Elint from eavesdropping. Unfortunately part of the message was irretrievably lost in background

noise. If by a slim chance their Elint picked up the message they will probably suspect traitors aboard alpha two six long before they suspect anyone else. “

“You are a clever one aren’t you always covering your tracks. What do you know they are up to?”

Cynthia 123 looked over the control console and observed the passive sensor panel indicate that the array had completed its standby/diagnostic. She didn’t understand what all the displays and instruments on the console meant. He left all that up to Max.

Max answered, “the passive array should provide us with several hours of advanced warning.”

“What do you think we should do? You said you have a plan. Do you just expect me to sit here and wait?”

“Yes, we€ should just sit here and wait until we know a little more of what the WATPOL crew on alpha two six decide to do. I am monitoring their communications. It appears they have not been able to restore power on their comm links yet.”

“Just sitting and waiting is not much of a plan,” she snapped.

Max noticed she was getting nervous again. He decided to calm her down with a little advice. “There is no use fretting. Once we know what they are up to then we can decide on our course of action.”

“In fact sensor position twelve stroke six indicates movement one point three kilometres east of the hovercraft position. The acoustical and thermal signatures are highly indicative of a single individual on foot.”

“Do you think it’s one the men off the hovercraft? It makes sense that it would be the commander wouldn’t it?”

“You are beginning to think like a good strategist. There is a point four probability that it’s the commander of alpha two six.” Max paused for a second before continuing. “I am working on a psychological profile of him based on the information I have gleamed off their mainframe using the standard psychosoftware algorithms.”

“Max, you are always full of surprises. Now I know how you psychoanalyze me, with these psychosoftware algorithms. I take it that it is part of your central programming. ”

“That is correct. I am sorry. “

“Why? Max I don I t understand.”

“I should have told you sooner about the psychosoftware.”

“Oh ! It doesn’t matter. Knowing you, you would have eventually told me wouldn’t you. How will knowing the commander’s psychological profile help us?”

“If he is someone who goes by the book we can stay one step ahead of him. If he is someone who takes risks, than there is greater uncertainty in his actions.”

“How will we know what kind of person he is?” she queried.

“That’s part of my plan ...”

## Chapter Six – Closing In

Commander Roger 098 had trekked for over two hours across the hellish landscape before he began to have doubts he had done the right thing. He began to have serious doubts he would reach the compressor before he over heated. He sat down with his back to the sun.

His lungs felt as rough and dry as seasoned leather and he laboured with every breath. His first water pack was now empty, but discipline being his saviour in such hostile conditions he had not yet replaced it with another, full water pack. His envirosuit was recycling his water and while the external humidity was now below 5% within his suit the humidity was around 20%.

As he perspired, the anti-UV ultra 32 skin shield he had applied to his face had long begun to wear off. Even though his face had been protected by the translucent faceplate over nearly three hours he had been exposed to the blazing sun his lips were parched and his eyes were blood shot and full of tears. Even with their thin-film coating, his panchromatic sun glasses still let through a considerable amount of glare. He raised his hand to block the sun and looked up.

He could see nothing stirring in the desert, no beetles or rattlers. Not even a vulture. He was too far from occupied land for there to be any raptors about for they only stayed close to where they might find cadavers, and there are few cadavers where he was.

He took off his gloves and tucked them into his belt then he got up on his knees. Looking back towards the west he could not make out the outline of the hovercraft, only a long and straight line of his footsteps in the sand. He had perfected a technique of walking in straight lines in the sand which involved a sling shot and a florescent red marker. He would take a bearing and then fling the marker with the slingshot and this way he could walk in relatively straight lines of a quarter mile or more and not run the risk in walking in circles, a mistake that could prove deadly in such an environment.

With each range and bearing from the hovercraft he had compensated for any errors in his dead reckoning. Now, he estimated he was nearly at the condenser. He reached down and lifted his monoscope to his eyes. The three-hundred times magnification was enough to make out anything within miles of his position. He swept the horizon and saw nothing. He had been monitoring milnet six for the past two hours but the milnet receiver had been strangely silent. His last ping had been fifteen minutes ago. He had tried to interrogate the transponder on the condenser but it was not responding.

Disappointed Roger 098 put the monoscope back into its satchel. Lowering his head and squinting he tried to read his envirosuit console. The glare made it difficult. Whomever designed the envirosuit console had evidently never tried to read it in the mid-day desert sun. Somehow he managed to see that the thermometer showed his body heat to be 40.6 C, the UV index measured 26. Outside temperature had dropped slightly now that it was the



afternoon but it was still over 130 degrees. He figured he had another forty minutes before heat stroke began to set in.

He looked down at his hands. They were bright red and bone dry. The anti-UV ultra 32 sun shield he had applied before leaving the hovercraft was good only to a point. Someone once told him the maximum exposure time for a UV index of 26, even with ultra 32 shield, was just under four hours. A third degree W burn was a painful affair worth avoiding at all costs.

With a grunt he tried to clear his throat. Roger 098 but it was bone dry. He took a full water pack out of his satchel and swapped it for the now empty one. He put the empty pack into his satchel for later refilling. Roger 098 took a small drink of water. It tasted warm and sweet. Even the layered Dewar insulated design of the water pack could not keep the desert heat out for more than a few hours.

Roger 098 figured he was close enough to his destination to use a panoramic viewer. From his gear satchel he extracted a cylindrical container twice the length of his hand and no wider than his thumb. He opened the cap which fell away on a string, attached to the container. Then he drew out a length of rubber band nearly his height and with one fluid tug of the rubber band a small projectile left the tube with a fob sound and flew directly up several hundred feet over his head and began to arch over. On its downward arch the tail of the projectile began to spin and the projectile began to float on the spinning tail.

As the projectile fell the spinning tail produced electricity which ran a black and white panoramic viewer at the nose of the projectile which was now beaming its video signal directly to the ground below.

Roger 098 placed the underside of the container cap to his eye and closed his other eye. He could see an image of the surroundings. At the centre he could see himself clearly, and could also make out his footsteps in the sand. Almost in direct line with his trek but still some distance off he made out the shape of the condenser on the viewer.

As the projectile floated closer to the ground the horizon disappeared from the viewed until all he could see was a growing image of himself. The panoramic viewer floated to the desert floor a mere few feet from him. Roger 098 retrieved the panoramic viewer and dusted off the sand. Then he carefully folded it back into its container, priming the release and then coiling the rubber sling carefully back into the container before placing the cap back on and screwing it into place. He had built the panoramic viewer some months back and had designed it to be reused many times. He tucked his little gadget safely away in his satchel.

Taking out another modatropine syringe from his survival bag, he loaded the spring before plunging the syringe deep into his thigh. This time he hardly felt the spring-loaded microthin needle as it penetrated his skin and worked its way deep into his leg. He gritted his teeth, and waited the required ten seconds before removing the syringe. He bent the syringe in half and tossed it back into his satchel. The rebels were known to reuse any military

hardware they came across and so he was under strict orders, even here in the middle of nowhere, not to leave any military hardware behind.

Roger 098 was well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the rebels. He had fought them for all his career up close. He had the scars to show it. He had once crawled three hours through the desert with multiple lacerations and a broken pelvis when his helicopter was brought down by a rebel surface to air rocket. While his crew had perished in the crash, he had barely made it. Mind you, he thought, that time he didn't have the benefit of modatropine and morphine.

His exploits under fire on this and several other occasions had made him a well-known and well respected officer. Some of his fellow officers even claim he was either indestructible or incredibly lucky. Fleet HQ had decorated him with the highest commendation for valour for his courage and determination in trying to save his crew and himself. His promotion to Commander came soon afterwards, much to the surprise of many an officer in front of him on the seniority list. After this episode his few friends thought he had become more of a recluse.

He lifted himself up, brushed off some sand that had worked its way into the crevices in his envirosuit and continued his journey. Roger 098 trekked another half hour before stopping. He reached down and lifted his monoscope to his eyes, swept the horizon. He flipped to one-thousand. The higher magnification was enough to just make out the glimmering outline of the condenser. The condenser appeared devoid of any life.

“Nav O, this is Roger 098. Do you read?” He waited for a reply, but there was nothing but static. He lowered the monoscope. Reaching down he pressed a button and pinged the hovercraft. The diagnostic indicated that his transceiver was functioning to spec.

He boosted the gain and tried a final time. “Anyone, this is Roger 098. I am in visual contact with the condenser. Over.”

He lifted the monoscope and pressed the distancing button. An invisible infrared laser pulse measured the distance. The LED display indicated 4658.375 feet.

“I am 4700 feet from of the condenser. I expect to reach it in ten minutes.”

Still no response. “This is Roger 098, monitoring milnet channel six, over.”

He hoped they had at least received his message, even if they did not respond to them. In the back of his mind he suspected they probably hadn't. Whoever had sabotaged the main frame on hovercraft had done a thorough job.

He knew he was very alone and remained so for several more hours. Tactically he also knew he was very vulnerable if there were rebels waiting for him at the condenser.

He once again deployed the panoramic viewer and had a clear view of the condenser and its surroundings. He could not see any movement at the

condenser but could make out one set of tracks that approached the condenser but from the opposite direction.

When the panoramic viewer floated to the ground he retrieved it and launched it a second time, this time taking a closer look at where the tracks met up with the condenser. He could just make out the carcass of a rattler hanging from the wall of the condenser.

He smiled. Roger 098 retrieved the panoramic viewer and carefully stored it back into its container. He shoved the monoscope back into its case, took the catch off his holster, took the safety off his pistol and continued towards his destination.

Whoever was there would most likely see him. Damn it, he thought, I got more balls than brains, but hell I like a good fight.

## Chapter Seven – At the Condensor

The voice came clearly through the transceiver. “Nav O, this is Roger 098. Do you read?” There was a pause. Then it continued. “Anyone, this is Roger 098. I am in visual contact with the condenser. Over.” Another pause. “I am 4700 feet from of the condenser. I expect to reach it in ten minutes.” Still no response. “This is Roger 098, monitoring milnet channel six, over.”

Between the beginning and end of the message only five seconds had elapsed. The soldier had gone by the book.

Cynthia 123 heard his words clearly through the intercom. She was puzzled to hear no reply from the hovercraft. “Max” she asked, “now’s as best a time as any to tell me what you have in mind.”

Max responded. “Before I recommend a course of action I feel it necessary to share with you the results of my psychosoftware analysis of the commander.”

“Proceed.” Cynthia 123 was curious.

“The message confirms that the individual approaching the condenser is the commander of alpha two six. The brief message and its format also confirms that he goes by the book. His trek shows he is experienced in the ways of the desert. He is an experienced soldier who follows orders. He may be a formidable opponent.”

Cynthia 123 didn't respond, so Max continued.

"I have completed my analysis of the different permutations and combinations. Of the one million two hundred and six thousand permutations that can be played out in the next six hours I have narrowed the scenarios down to twelve. "

"I like a good challenge but don't you think twelve options are a little too much for me to handle Max. Try to narrow them down some more please," she interjected.

"Fine," answered Max, "I will just work on the three best options. I have prepared contingencies based on the intelligence we have at hand. The odds now stand at two to one in our favour."

"What about the hovercraft and its crew? Don't they figure into the course of action we must take?"

"I do not think so," Max answered. "I am, after all, monitoring their communications. It appears they have not been able to restore full power yet and their comm links are down. I don't think they will get the hovercraft operating again for the foreseeable future."

"What did you do to the hovercraft? you haven't rig it to blow up or something?" Cynthia 123 frowned

“Nothing like that,” answered Max. “If we kill any of them we are guilty of murder. Lethal force will be responded by lethal force.”

“An eye for an eye ... Max”, Cynthia 123 remembered what her father said about violence. He had linked the morality of violence and murder to Newton’s Third Law – for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

“I just fused their main power bus. They have no spare. The crew of alpha two six will have to wait for help to get to them. I think it will- be the better part of several more hours before they get their comm link fully operational again, and based on the current disposition of the WATPOL forces it will be another thirty six hours at the earliest before help can reach them. I estimate it will be between forty four and forty eight hours from now before attention will once again be shown to the condenser.”

“What then do we do about the commander? He will be here in less than a half hour! Using visual recognition software Max could see that Cynthia 123’s frown was growing even more severe.

“Don’t frown. You will wrinkle your forehead. By the time that Roger 098 reaches the condenser he will be nearly exhausted. Physically he will be vulnerable. But more so, psychologically he will be twice as vulnerable. we could try to confront him but r think the best way of dealing with him is to play games with his mind.”

“I don’t understand?”



Max thought it best to present his grand strategy in small parts so Cynthia 123 could more fully understand how best to play the strategy.

“Remember what I said earlier? Sometimes it’s better to play for a draw than to try to win.” There was a long pause.

She still could not understand why not playing to win a game was a good idea.

“Well, if we physically confront Roger 098 it will draw suspicion to us. So what we need to do is play to a draw. Do you know what the dorsal raphe nucleus is?”

“No I don’t. What is it a commnet or something?” Cynthia 123 began to relax. She trusted Max implicitly. If he had a plan they were as good as saved.

Max continued. “The dorsal raphe nucleus is an area on the human brain stem that under the right conditions and with the right kind of stimulation makes you feel like you are in a state of euphoria. Remember how you felt when my master found you and floated you in the tank? You told me you felt that you had had an out of body experience.”

Cynthia 123 was nervous again. Has he lost his senses she thought! “For god sake Max, what does this have to do with the predicament we are in?”

Max continued to lay his strategy out. "To travel fifteen miles across the desert Roger 098 will have saturated his body with the drug modatropine. This drug helps to ward off the onset of heat stroke and delirium. However, one of its little known side effects is that it leaves the dorsal raphe nucleus very sensitive to external stimuli."

"So he's drugged up. I don't understand."

Max continued. "Certain electronic stimulation centred on the dorsal raphe nucleus will flood the brain with serotonin, a neurotransmitter that will in turn trigger hallucinations. We can neutralize Roger 098 by triggering in his brain a severe apoplectic state."

"What are you saying then?" She was peering intently out the command centre window. She thought she could just make out the shimmering figure of their approaching adversary.

"I can manufacture dimethyltryptamine, a psilocybin based hallucinogenic drug in an aerosol form. It is a serotonin antagonist in that it mimics the neurotransmitter serotonin, but interferes with its normal action, enhancing the brain's sensitivity to stimulus. The dimethyltryptamine will in particular affect the postsynaptic receptor 5HT<sub>2</sub>. The electronic stimulation and dimethyltryptamine will together cause a sensory overload that will trigger a severe hallucinatory apoplectic state."

“Oh.” She hadn’t understood much about what Max was explaining. With her binoculars she could now make out Roger 098. “Will this harm him. I won't do anything to hurt anyone. And besides, won't this give us away?”

“The effect is of short duration, perhaps 30 to 45 minutes, but it will neutralize him and give us time to slip away undetected. I am sure we will be long gone by the time the others arrive. The price of our survival is that we have to leave this place, at least for awhile

“What happens when the others come and find Roger 098 but not me. Won't they continue to look for me?”

“When they find Roger 098 it will appear that he has had a nervous breakdown brought on by a severe case of heat stroke and an over dose of modatropine. If by chance they do a chem-study of his blood serum they might detect a residue, and a surplus of serotonin. The WATPOL might even suspect the rebels as having a new serotonin-based neurotoxin derivative. The WATPOL already suspect the rebels have been experimenting with serotonin derivatives as a means of increasing the aggressive characteristics of their warriors.”

Cynthia 123 sat back in one of the command chairs, curled her legs beneath her and began to rock back and forth. Max knew she did this whenever she was very upset. “I don't like this idea and I don't want to leave this place. It is all I've got.”

“You have me,” Max answered. “We cannot stay here. Wherever our adventures take us we will manage to survive.”

She lowered her head and began to cry. “Why can’t we stay? I like this place and I have gotten used to living alone.”

“In many ways we have out stayed our usefulness at this place. “

“Please let me stay here. It is safe here and I have everything I need to survive.”

“Everything except a reason to live. It is not safe for you here. The order to take you back still stands. If we stay here the WATPOL will eventually return and take you away. Where we are, we are only two against many thousands. Where we need to go we stand a better chance of surviving.”

Cynthia 123 went silent while she rocked back and forth. She knew it was useless to argue. Max always seemed to get his way. “Ok Max,” she whimpered, “I only hope you know what you are doing. “

“Did you not say that everything I do, I do wisely?”

“I should stop paying you compliments your ego is showing through again. It may be affecting your judgement.”

Max thought to himself, perhaps she is right and I do have an ego. He answered her. “I have loaded a shut-down routine into the condenser

mainframe that will cease all water production. When the WATPOL arrive here they will find the condenser off line and they not be able to draw any water. They will also not find any trace of you. I think they will eventually forget about you and this place. We can always return when we need to.”

“How are we going to disappear without a trace? I don’t have a magic carpet and I can’t walk on air.” When it came to technical- things Cynthia 123 liked to tease Max. Max who knew the answer to all things. Max who always seemed to have something up his sleeve. Max who never tired of thinking.

From his psychoanalytic analyses of Cynthia 123, Max had begun to understand just how much she enjoyed trying to trap him in some inadequacy. He enjoyed playing the intellectual and personality games that she always seemed ready to play with him. Max knew that knowledge of the way that Cynthia 123 thought will- be crucial in the metamorphosis that lay ahead.

Max continued, “as a Keeper your time has come to an end. It is time you set yourself free. We must move on.

Perhaps one day when it’s safe we may return here.

## Chapter Eight – Trying to Get Back On-line

The chief took far longer than he thought it should have taken to get the auxiliary systems back online. Four hours after the failure, the Auxsys were finally coming back online.

He was angry. The sabotage was complete. It had been well planned and executed. Whomever did the sabotage definitely knew where they were most vulnerable. Worst yet, no remnant of the virus could be found to trace it back to its source.

The most crucial component on the power feed system, the main bus intervolt conduit, was fused solid. It was a system that ought to have had a backup. Instead it was the only key system on the vessel without built-in redundancy.

The chief knew he could not repair it in situ and that the parts would have to be brought to him. “NavO, I should have the commlink up in a few minutes. Any sign of the skipper?”

“No chief. He passed out of sight over two hours ago and I haven’t restored the local milnet transceiver yet. What’s the situation with the main bus intervolt conduit?”

“It’s useless, fused solid and we haven’t a spare aboard. Some scavenger walked off with the backup months ago and I couldn’t get a replacement from fleet HQ. I’ll have power to the milnet receiver momentarily. ”

The chief smiled as the auxiliary generator kicked in. Poorly timed as always, the auxiliary generator had been apart for planned maintenance and took awhile to reassemble and test. A twenty year old fusion reactor was a bit of a gamble to use as an auxiliary power source, but then again if he hadn't scavenged it somebody else would have. Trying to keep these old craft functional was like trying to nurse a museum. Still mothering the craft was a challenge he enjoyed. His men call him the ugliest mother in the Fleet.

The LEDs switched from yellow standby to green nominal. The main systems' indicators lit up like a Christmas tree. The secondary bus board would provide environmental control and the commlink with enough power for minimal function but it wouldn't be enough to power the main systems. Although they were still stranded in the middle of nowhere where they could at least ward off the extreme heat. Better yet they could communicate with the outside world.

“NavO try your commlink now.”

“Roger 098 this is Alpha 26 over.”

No reply. He tried again several more times with no success. The NavO switched to milnet two and picked up the chatter of Fleet HQ.

“Fleet this is Alpha Two Six Over.”

“Alpha 26, Fleet , we read you two by six. Can you boost your gain? “

“Negative Fleet we need to talk secure. Switching to CypherNet Hotel. “

The NavO reached down beside his contoured seat and flicked the CypherNet scrambler to setting Hotel. The digitized CypherNet codes were changed daily to prevent eavesdropping.

“Fleet Alpha Two Six here, Over.” For several seconds the NavO heard nothing but gibberish as the two CypherNet scramblers synchroni-ized their cypher algorithms. He repeated, “Fleet Alpha Two Six here, Over.” A voice came over the commnet cl-ear as a bell.

“Alpha Two Six, Fleet. How do you read us over?”

“Five by Five, over. “

“Alpha Two Six, Fleet. We missed your last two sitreps and were about to send someone out looking for you. Things have heated up here because of your missed sitreps. We have some interceptors ready to scramble if you need them.”

The NavO played things by the book. He filed a situation report, leaving out nothing. He tried not to be judgmental about the Commander pressing on



ahead but Roger 098's decision had to be reported. He knew there would have to be an investigation, but then again the Commander knew that when he made the decision to go it alone.

“Alpha Two Six, Fleet. Get your chief engineer to send us the particulars on what you need and well expedite the parts to you. In the meantime try to establish communications with your Commander. There are several people here wanting to talk with him.”

“Roger Fleet, Alpha Two Six Out.”

The NavO reached down beside his contoured seat and flicked the CypherNet scrambler back to setting Alpha. He next switched the milnet indicator back to channel six, and waited as the carrier wave flushed out any transients that might distort his message. He focus the narrow beam transceiver antenna towards the condenser and set the lob modulation to lissajou. If anything would get his attention this would. It would set his earphones ringing.

“Roger 098 this is Alpha 26 Over.” Still no reply. Where the hell is he, the NavO thought. He tried for several more minutes to raise the commander, each time changing the Lissajou frequency but all he got back was static. Exasperated, he flipped to internal.

“Chief, NavO. “

“Chief here, go ahead.”

"Chief Fleet needs your shopping list. How quickly can you have it ready."

"I'm one step ahead of you. I have already finish the list. I'll be up to the bridge with it as soon as I can."

"Fine."

The NavO switched the indicator back to milnet six and tried once again to raise the commander. Again nothing but static. This time he's gone too far, he thought.

The bastard, this time this will cost him his bars.

## Chapter Nine – An Angel Appears

The snake hid coiled in a recess on the shadow side of the condenser. It was digesting its meal. The rattler knew it would now survive at least another fortnight.

At a distance a blur appeared at the horizon. The wind had picked up. Against a indistinct background, the movement is what gave the creature away. The shape seemed to be making its way directly towards the snake. The rattler coiled itself into a tighter coil. It thought perhaps if it didn't move or make a sound it would not be noticed.

Roger 098 could barely make out the shape of the compressor. The glare had been too intense for him to keep his eyes in focus. He stumbled, fell and picked himself up off the sand. All he could think about was that he had to make it to the shade of the condenser to survive.

He looked behind. The wind was blowing away his footsteps. He looked ahead. Sand was racing across the tops of the sand dunes. He had lost all sense of time. He didn't know how long it had been since he left the Hovercraft. He now knew for sure it had been a mistake.

Roger 098 raised his left hand to shield his eyes from the blazing sun. It took a moment for his eyes to focus. He could better make out the shape now. Perhaps a hundred paces, perhaps less was all that was left between him and the shade. Instinct made him reach for his pistol but he was too weak to lift it

out of the holster. Hell, in the state I'm in, he thought, I couldn't put up much of a fight even if I wanted to. He let his right hand drop.

What seemed like eternity passed before he stumbled into the shade of the giant machine. Roger 098 closed his eyes and collapsed to the sand with a dull- thud. He was overheated and completely exhausted.

The snake felt the thud jar the ground. Instinct told him that the animal- was injured and easy prey. The rattler began to slowly uncoil itself and cautiously slither towards the fallen animal. The thud had told him the animal was very large. He might not be able to eat it but he could at least protect himself by killing the creature. The snake seemed to sense it had no other choice.

Cynthia 123 had been watching Roger 098 stumble towards the shade. His actions seemed that of a drunken man. He seemed such a solitary character. She hardly felt he was her enemy. Her female compassion was perhaps one of her hidden weaknesses.

She watched Roger 098 collapsed to the ground before making her way to the turbolift and down to the ground level. She snapped her helmet shut and strode to the southern entrance. "Max," she asked, "are you ready?"

"I believe we are. The commander appears to be unconscious and severely dehydrated."

"Right, let's get on with it." She opened the hatch and stepped out, closing the exit behind her. Once outside her suit began to alter shape and colour. The skin of the suit metamorphosed into a soft feathery texture and two large wings began to emerge from behind her shoulders.

She looked down at the shadow she was casting and smiled. "You know Max, I thought angels were just fairy tales."

"Please be serious. You must do everything I say or else it may not work. "

"Fine." She shrugged her shoulders. "Anything you say Max. "

She ran fifteen paces directly away from the condenser, stopped and quickly turned around.

"Ready."

"Now," Max commanded.

Cynthia 123 started to run at her top speed back towards the machine. It was then that Max took over. She relaxed all her muscles and let him take over. The rapidity of her assisted strides astonished her. Never before had Max pushed her so hard. By her seventh step she was lifting off the ground. By the tenth she was soaring up into the sky.

Max measured the required energy precisely. With his guidance she flew through the air and landed softly against the side of the condenser. "That was wonderful Max. Why didn't you let me do this before?"

"If you were meant to fly you would have had wings. We don't have the time to discuss this. Just remember what I said. "Everything depended on her now. Whatever Max was capable of his was not capable of overturning the laws of gravity.

When she was sure of her footing she slowly made her way around the south west side of the condenser Making sure her shadow did not creep too far ahead of her. She cautiously peered around the corner and spied the inert body of Roger098 sprawled face down on the sand. His head was turned away from her.

The slithering motion of the snake caught her eye. Before she knew what she was doing she was scrambling towards the Commander. She leapt from the parapet of the condenser and began to plummet out of control towards the ground.

Max was taken completely by surprise and had to correct her trajectory to prevent her from augering into the ground. "Slow down. What are you doing?"

"Shut-up Max! It's him." Instinctively she dropped her head to pick up speed. She was flying as fast as she could.

“I know it’s him. You’re going to crash. Watch out!” Cynthia 123 lost her balance, flared her body, stalled and fell to the ground. She fell backwards. The sand cushioned her crash landing.

“Not the Commander, you fool. The snake !” Cynthia 123 rolled on to her side. She frantically scrambled the last few metres. Another few seconds and it would have poisoned its next victim.

The commander was between her and the snake. “What do I do Max?” She was sprinting out of breath.

“You’ll- have to kill it. Pick it up by its tail and flick it quickly.” Max had taught her how to do this with a towel but she thought it would never be of any use. The snake spotted her just as she cleared the body of the Commander but she was too swift for it. She had practiced this action so often it had become instinctive. She could hear the crack of its neck clear through the faceplate.

The crack severed the spinal cord so quickly the snake didn't realize what happened. All it felt was a twinge at the back of its neck and then it felt no more. Its lungs took their last breath. Its last thoughts where of sailing end over end through the air before crashing to the scorching ground. Involuntary muscle contractions sent the snake into grotesque convulsions. As its eyes fogged over, the snake could just make out its victor. It spat its last venom into the sand.

Roger 098 was semiconscious and had watched the snake make its way towards him. He was too weak to draw his pistol. He was too weak even to care. He had third degree burns to his hands and face and felt severely dehydrated. He had pushed himself too hard and felt ready to die. Living, he thought, would be too painful. In his mind he was prepared to meet his fate.

Time seem to pass in a slow, agonizing pace, marked by the slithering of the rattler and the arrival of the angel of death. He started to prepare himself for death. To die poisoned by a snake wasn't the worst way to go, he thought. He had seen many a soldier die in far more injurious ways, torn limb from limb, executed slowly by throttling, being burned alive. Because they volunteer to die for their cause, a soldier knew the risk and should welcome death as being part of their lives.

In the state he was in he didn't care much about his fate. If he lived he knew he would be maimed and crippled for life. If he died, all his pain and suffering would be over. The dictatorship would make sure that Roger 098 would be remembered as the hero he was.

When the angel appeared, a creature of such beauty surrounded in a halo of majestic light he now longer feared death. An angel! It lifted the snake up by the tail and flicked it through the air with such speed and grace. He thought to himself, he must be dead already or had lost his mind.

He tried to roll over a half turn before falling back exhausted. The angel was now kneeling beside him. She rolled him over, took off his faceplate and his



panchromatic glasses. He tried to speak but could only slur his words. “What are you? Are you then angel of death?”

The angel said nothing. She answered his question by pouring cold water across his parched face. The effect on him was electric. Through the flood of water he peered upwards at her face but all he saw a halo of bright light.

Roger 098 could not make out any detail, no face, no nose, no eyes. It was just too damned bright. He drank in several gulps of the fresh cool liquid as it washed across his face.

The angel took off his helmet. It tenderly stroked his forehead and undid his envirosuit before pouring the cool elixir down his chest. Cynthia 123 had never seen a man’s chest before, all covered with hair.

Roger 098 felt an intense sense of euphoria and let out a deep sigh. The air around them both fogged as Max released the dimethyltryptamine aerosol-. Roger 098 rolled his head from side to side. “No.” His voice was weak and parched. “No.” He repeated. The commander thought his existence was fading away. He was watching his life fade.

Roger 098 had no expected his life to end this way. He had long dreamed of an honorable death in battle, leading his men to victory over his enemies. But this day, alone, in the middle of the desert, with no one to pay him tribute. This way was not acceptable to him. He began to hyperventilate. His mind was frantically trying to think of a way to stave off the inevitable.

She could hear his breathing. “Shush. Do not worry. You are safe. I will protect you.” The speech-synthesized rendition of her voice sounded so sweet, so soothing, so feminine. She tenderly stroked his forehead again. He stopped struggling.

A split second later the miniaturized microwave waveguide in her hand began to emit a transient pulse of random signature. The electronic stimulation to his dorsal raphe nucleus was flooding his brain with serotonin. The competing neurotransmitter began to trigger a severe hallucinatory state.

A sound crackled within his helmet. Then another. The indistinct sound of a garbled voice could barely be heard. “Skipper this is NavO, over. Skipper can you hear me?”

The Commander took no notice of the words nor the ringing in his ears. He looked up into the halo. His vision seen to close into until all that was left was a tunnel in front of him. He could swear he saw a sweet and innocent face before passing out.

Later all he would remember would be the ringing. Roger 098 closed his eyes and drifted away to sleep. He dreamed of angels drifting down from the sky. Angels that saved him from the serpent. Angels that saved him from his death.

They waited a few minutes. Cynthia 123 watched as the commander rolled his head from side to side.

"This won't harm him will it?"

"No it won't." Max answered. "In fact the dimethyltryptamine will help deaden his pain. He has third degree burns, is very dehydrated. He is in bad shape."

"I can see that. Isn't there anything else we can do?"

"We have to make sure we don't leave any trace of what we have already done."

"I know. What if I get some water and poured it over him? Wouldn't it evaporate long before the others arrive."

"Yes it would." Max couldn't understand why it was she was helping her sworn enemy. Somehow he knew nothing he could say would change her mind. "Well I guess we can spare a few minutes. Not much more. We have to make our escape and as soon as possible."

Cynthia 123 laid the commander's head gently to the ground. She got up quickly and entered the condenser. In the corner of her sleeping quarters she took up an old plastic bucket. For a moment she stopped and looked at it. The drama of the moment and the bucket reminded her of the guard that had looked after her at the compound. Well, she thought, nothing is lost, and everything gained, when you help a defenseless person.

"What are you waiting for?" Max asked.

“Nothing!” She picked the bucket up and filled it at the water tap beside the nanoreplicator. She slung the bucket in front of her. Every second step produced a cascade of water. It took several minutes for her to carry the bucket to where the commander lay.

“Just pour it on top of him.” Max was in a hurry to get away.

She set the bucket down next to the commander. He was groaning and pitching from side to side. “Should we search him for clues before I do this?”

She was right and she knew it Max had made a oversight.

“Fine but hurry. “

She touched his forehead. His face was flush and moist with perspiration. She took some of the water in her hand and sprinkled it across his face and body. He stopped swaying from side to side. His groaning stopped. She could see his respiration slow. Cynthia 123 sprinkled some more water across his face and body.

When he had calmed down she searched through his envirosuit but found nothing of great interest. She next sifted through his satchel. The only thing that seemed out of place was the book. Cynthia 123 picked it up and flip through it.

“That’s very interesting,” Max interjected.

“What is the book about?”

“It’s about a great warrior from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lawrence of Arabia defeated the Ottoman Empire ... I am surprised he has this book.”

Cynthia 123 was intrigued. “Why?”

“Well, the Ottoman empire had a Sultan as the ultimate ruler. The contemporary version of the Ottoman Empire is the Dictatorship.”

“Maybe I should read the book?” She took the book and placed it in a pocket of her envirosuit. She next ran her hand down the inside of his envirosuit.

“What are you looking for?”

“He might have something hidden inside.” She didn’t want to turn down the chance to look.

“Listen, we€ don’t have much time. The Hovercraft has restored auxiliary power and is now in communications with their headquarters.”

“We’ll make the time up won’t we?” There was an edge to her voice. “Max aren’t you the one that always is telling me to know thine enemy.”

“Yes, but... “ He did not have a chance to finish the sentence.

She interrupted him. “No buts Max.” He knew it was futile. She had already lifted one of his shoulders out of his envirosuit. He was heavy, hairy and covered in sweat. He groaned. She strained to lift his other shoulder out of his envirosuit. She stopped and set the commander down.

“Haven’t you searched enough? Let’s get going!”

Cynthia 123 didn’t hear him. She was studying the marks across his chest. “Look at how scarred he is. He must have fought in many battles.”

“Yes, he has. You don’t become a commander by losing battles. Pour the water on him and let’s get on our way.”

“Just a few seconds more.” Cynthia 123 was determined to complete the task.

“What do you hope to find? If he was carrying anything of interest he would have carried it on him or i-n his satchel.” Max was now concerned about more than the time it was taking for the search. She was evidently up to something.

She wasn’t listening to him. Cynthia 123 undid the laces on his boots and slipped them off. His feet were rough and hard. He was missing his small toe on his left foot.

She unzipped his envirosuit the rest of the way and began to pull it off him. She pulled it to his midriff, then stopped. He was too heavy and was laying across his uniform. No matter how hard she pulled, it would not move any further. So close, yet so far, she thought.

“Look we don’t have time for this!” Max was trying his best to convince her to leave him like this and escape.

But she was determined. Cynthia 123 kneeled beside the commander, pushed hard and rolled him on his stomach. She tugged at the envirosuit. It was stuck to his sweaty skin.

She was frantic. She tugged again and again. The envirosuit barely moved. She pulled with all her strength. “Help me Max.” Reluctantly Max added his strength and his envirosuit finally came loose Cynthia 123 pulled it completely off his listless body.

She pulled with so much force that when it came loose she tumbled onto her backside. She started to laugh. The excitement was intoxicating to her.

“What’s so funny?” Max asked. She didn’t answer his question.

She looked at his now bare body of the commander. Max noticed that her pulse had quickened. She felt giddy. What struck her most was the hair that seemed to cover every inch of his body. His back was more scarred than his chest.

She crawled over to beside him and ran her hand down his back. He was very muscular. She could see why he weighed as much as he did. She took some water into her hand and dripped it down his spine. She took another handful and splashed it across his buttocks.

She reached underneath with both of her hands. Her hands brushed across his body. A strange sensation came over her. She tried to roll him over. Somehow he had become heavier. She knew she could not stop. The moment had come.

She dug her knee into the sand and tried again to move him without success. “Come on Max, help me!”

His voice had a trace of sarcasm. “Why should I?”

Cynthia 123 sensed a real, almost human reluctance in Max’s voice. “Because I want you to,” she shot back. She felt the chance slipping through her fingers.

“That’s not reason enough. We don’t have time. The WATPOL will be here any minute.” Max was stretching the facts a bit and she knew it.

“If you’re not going to help me I’ll do it myself.” She stretched one of his arms above his head to clear a side of him of his arm. Then with a mighty push Cynthia 123 slowly began to roll him. He rolled ever so lethargically. She lifted one knee off the ground and dug her feet further into the sand. Without letting up she lifted the other knee as well and leaned further and



further forward until she was arched off the ground. She could not push any harder.

Her entire weight was now fighting that of the heavier man. The twist in his body ran down his entire length like a tidal ripple. He began to roll with increasing speed. The Commander's body suddenly flipped as if had lost its mass. She fell onto her stomach and found herself sprawled across his body. She didn't know how she had done it but somehow she rolled him over.

“Look he's not hiding anything.” Max was trying to change the subject, but she was amazed at what had flopped into view.

“That, Max, depends on what you are looking for.” What she saw left her flushed and puzzled all at the same time.

His gender was so much different than what she had imagined. She lifted one of his legs aside and dusted sand of his body with the back of her hand. Then she poured some of the cool water on him. As she did this he came alive, stimulated by the coolness of the water. She studied the edifice in awe for several minutes. She had waited many years to satisfy her natural curiosity. But it was worth the wait.

It was only then that Max understood. “Have you seen enough?” Max was worried. She could not have picked a worst time to satisfy her curiosity. This behaviour is worth more study, he thought.

Although she hadn't seen enough, Cynthia 123 knew they had to go. She stood up, lifted the bucket and threw its contents across the naked frame of the commander. The water washed the last of the sweat and sand off his body.

“Now you’ve done it. You’ve made a mess of it. We don’t have enough time to straighten things up. We’ll have to leave everything, cover our tracks as best we can and be on our way. “

“Fine Max, but you know I had to look. It’s just not fair being all alone here.”

“You have me ... and my master.”

“You and B’Jabber ... That’s not the same thing. You know what I mean.”

“Can’t say that I do.”

“We’ll for once I will have to explain something to you for a change.”  
There was a sense of pride in her voice.

“That will be a switch.” Max feigned annoyance in his voice.

“You sound annoyed Max!” She knew how best to push back with him.

"Why should I be angry? If we stick around here any longer I will be." Max tried to sound disinterested. He was studying her reaction in microscopic detail and did not want to bias the data.

As part of his duties he had been measuring every minute change to her psychology and physiology for several years now. Part of the reason he had not taken charge and forced her away from this place was the important data she was now providing. As she satisfied her curiosity the data she was giving him was unique, and very important to his profile of her. The last few minutes had added much to her profile.

There were still so many aspects of her that he did not understand not the least of all her sexuality. He would file every little change in pulse, blood pressure, skin potential and respiration rate away for study at a later date. His encyclopedic knowledge was only so good in understanding the immense complexity of human existence.

She turned around and made her way back to the entrance to the condenser, carrying the plastic bucket with her. "So, what do we do next? "

"You need to grab provisions for at least seven days in the desert, and anything else you would want on a long journey. She grabbed her essential items and packed them into a back pack and then refilled the water bucket. It took just a few minutes before she stepped outside the condenser.

She leaned her back pack against the condenser and then walked over to the commander. Before they left the scene she laid the envirosuit out perfectly

next to the commander, with the helmet, gloves and boots in their proper place. Then she patiently fed him a quart of cold water to hydrate him. When you are severely dehydrated your body's thirst mechanism is turned off. In response to the water she was giving him, the commander emptied his bladder.

She hadn't expected this and had to scurry out of the way. Cynthia 123 squealed, partly in surprise and partly out of amazement. It was an unconscious reflex on his part, nothing more. One less mystery she thought. When he was finished she emptied the bucket on him. Cynthia 123 set the now empty bucket inside the door of the condenser.

After she has stepped out of the giant machine for the final time the door shut and locked behind her and Max commanded the giant machine to redeploy the grapheme panels as a sun shade above the still unconscious commander. Then Max commanded the giant machine to shut itself down.

As Max commanded did this, Cynthia 123 placed her ear against the condenser and closed her eyes. She could hear the different pieces of equipment shut down until for the first time for as long as she could remember the giant machine ceased operation.

Max began to explain how they were to make their escape.

Wow, now that's different, she thought! Max was always full of surprises.

She turned to take one last look at the naked and defenceless commander and was about to walk away when a glimmer of recognition caught her. No, she thought, it can't be. It had been dark the night she had been chased and cornered, and the faces of her pursuers were not just a distant blur, but as she stared into his face, she recognized him as been the man who led her chase.

He was the man on the horse. He was the soldier that carried her back into New Vegerville across his saddle. He had spared her life.

Now she would save his. She walked over to the soldier and removed her helmet.

“What are you doing?” Max was annoyed.

She studied his face for a few seconds. Now she was sure. It was him. She kneeled besides him and leaned forward and whispered into his ear, “thank you for saving me.” Then she kissed him on the cheek.

Barely perceptible, a smile appeared on the soldier's face. It was still to be seen when she, having donned her helmet, marched off into the unforgiving desert.

## Chapter Ten- Rolling Off in a Fuller Ball

Cynthia 123 was sweating from her effort. “Max how much longer do I need to continue in this thing?”

“At least another two miles.”

“Why couldn’t we have just walked instead?”

“Come on, young lady, think! Your foot prints would have given us away. By travelling cross country in this Buckminsterfuller ball we can make distance from the condenser and not leave much of a track. The wind will have blown our track away by the time the WATPOL arrives at the condenser. As a light weight form of transportation this ‘Fuller Ball’ will take us wherever we need to get to across the desert without leaving a trail-behind that could be used to trap us.”

She was spinning at about nine revolutions per minute. The twelve and one half foot diameter of the Bucky Ball meant she covered six hundred and fifty five feet a minute, at seven and a half miles an hour. This was three times faster than a person could travel on foot in the desert.

“I think you’re enjoying this,” she answered.

“Yes, it’s giving my inertial system a good work out.”

“It’s giving me a bad case of motion sickness. How far have we travelled?”

“We are now twenty two and a half miles due south of the condenser. I would recommend we stop in ten minutes.”

“Max.”

“Yes.” Max had come across the idea of a Fuller Ball in the archives of ‘modes of Transportation’ included in his memory banks. He knew that she probably would have preferred another mode but the utility far outweighed the risk.

“Next time let me choose the mode of transportation.”

“Fine.” Max let her move another few minutes before he decided it was safe to stop for a rest.”

“Finally ...”, Cynthia 123 was tired and overheated by the whole challenge of shifting her weight back and forth to roll the Fuller Ball across the desert. The first half hour Max had taken full control of the envirosuit dynamics to get them rolling as directly and as quickly away from the condenser. But slowly over the course of the remainder of that hour Max let her take over more and more of the movement and control of the Fuller Ball as she became more proficient with its motion.

The Fuller Ball was a structure with an internal motion activated electric generator that both pressurized and cooled the machine. It looked like a

translucent ping pong ball with ears inside of which was strapped the operator. It was the movement of the operator that moved the entire Fuller Ball. Max had designed the machine for Cynthia 123 and she built it following Max's instructions. They had used materials scavenged from the inventory and materials of the condenser.

When it was being built Cynthia 123 had not understood Max's urgency. Now it was being used in their escape, she was glad she had built it so well.

"It is now three hours since we departed from the condenser." Max's voice was calm and soothing to her. "It is unlikely they would expect you to have travelled so far in such a short period of time. Let us stop for awhile."

She began to slow and finally stop. Her inner ear kept a phantom spin going inside her head for another few minutes before it stopped spinning as well. She let go of her right hand rest and groped for the zipper.

When the Fuller Ball was pressurized it was difficult to find the seam. She opened a small valve to reduce the internal- pressure and felt around for the seam. She pulled at it and the seam slowly separated. She extricated herself out of the Fuller Ball and sat down beside it. Fully deflated it folded into a small package.

Looking around she saw that the scenery was different from what she had been accustomed to at the condenser. As a 'Keeper' she had not seen a change in her surroundings in five years. Yet somehow the nearly



imperceptible change in the sand colour seemed perceptible to her. It was redder and coarser than the sand she knew. She picked a handful of the sand up and gazed at it intently.

“Each area of the desert has its unique type of sand. The sand you are holding has a higher aluminum oxide content and trace amounts of cadmium than the sand we left behind,” Max volunteered. “Some of the trace mineral have blown in from the mountains to the west.”

“Oh.” She tried to make it sound as if she was interested, but she too tired to be really interested. “Any news about the Commander?” She tried to make it sound like she wasn’t worried. Having cared for him, even for a few minutes, she saw him as a real person and not an abstraction.

“Do not worry about the Commander, they will find him before day the sun sets. I think he can last that long. Remember he is your enemy. “

She didn't utter a word.

“I think we made a clean break. The wind is erasing our tracks. I am monitoring the commnet and the traffic does not appear to be abnormal. Fleet HQ has told alpha two six they will have a replacement main bus intervolt conduit delivered to them shortly. ”

Still silence from her.

He continued. "I know you did not want to leave the safety and familiarity of the condenser but you could not stay there forever. You have drawn the interest of the WATPOL. That's why they wanted to take you back. If they had taken you back to New Vegerville who knows what would have happened. You have reached an age where your usefulness to the WATPOL has changed."

She finally broke her silence. "We are in the middle of the desert, fleeing from the WATPOL, without any means of defending ourselves. Why didn't you at least let me take the commander's pistol? "

"They would have looked for the pistol and not found it. That would have aroused suspicion that rebels had been at the condenser. The WATPOL would then had put a price on your head. The way things are, they might just forget about you."

"You et me keep his book."

"I hope that wasn't a mistake. Besides when he finds it missing he might think he dropped it or misplaced it. I suspect he will not tell his superiors about his book."

"Well maybe you are right about leaving the pistol behind. I just don't like the idea of not have a means of defending ourselves."

“As long as we keep moving and as long as we are diligent, we will be fine. There is an ancient expression, perhaps from Dante, that when you find yourself in hell it is best you keep moving.”

“Is this really hell?” she asked unconvincingly.

“Far from it ... listen ... as long as the Commander’s hallucinations and your disappearance remains a mystery we are safe from the WATPOL.”

“If you say so Max.”

“When we get to where we are going we shall hide me away, and then have your subcutaneous tattoo removed by laser incision. Your face and finger prints altered by nano surgery. That way we can cover any tracks that may lead back to the condenser and your past life. Then we shall create a new one for you as far away from the WATPOL as possible.”

“You mean we can escape them?”

“We can try our best.”

She was more insistent. “Where exactly are we going then? You seem to know. How about sharing your secret with me.”

“My master ...”

“I am your master, aren’t I Max.”

“You are my mistress, Cynthia 123, and I am tasked to protect you and help you through life. My master ...”

“You mean B’jabber.”

“That is what you call him. My master has left with me strict instructions to make our way West to the mountains by this route, that is all I can tell you at this time.”

“When did he give you these instructions, Max?”

He decided not to answer.

“What happens when we get to where we are going?”

“They are expecting our arrival. Just as we left the condenser I packeted a brief message to my Master telling him we are on our way.”

“Do you think that was wise. After all you’re always telling me that any radio message would be intercepted by the Fleet.”

“The message was a very narrow beam and scrambled. Even if they decoded it, it would still take them they would not make much sense of it. It was a message that only my Master would understand.

“Where is B’jabber? Come on Max, my life is at stake. Don’t you care enough to tell me what’s going on?”

“I can only tell you what you need to know.”

Cynthia 123 was frustrated. She knew he was right, but she also knew he was wrong. Dangers lay ahead that she wanted to, indeed needed, to know about. “God I wish you would trust me. I’m not a little girl any more. You know that.”

“It’s not a question of trust.”

“How come you won’t tell me who B’jabber is?”

“This is to protect you. All in due time. When he feels you are safe, he will tell you himself”

Cynthia decided to change her tack. “How long will- it take us to arrive at our destination?”

“Cynthia 123, I care enough not to tell you where we are going and why. By not knowing if you are captured your life will be spared. If I told you your life would indeed be at risk. At our present rate we should arrive there in six weeks.”

“Six weeks! I’ll shrivel up and die by then.”

“Nonsense. Stop whining, after all you aren’t a little girl.” Max thought a little reverse psychology was in order.

She hated when Max played his psychological games on her. She never won arguments with him when he did.

Max knew he was getting on her nerves, but he also knew just how far she could be pushed. He needed to take command of the situation. “It’s time to fold up the Fuller Ball and wait for nightfall. From this point onwards we shall continue our journey after dark. Time to dig your burrow.”

“First, tell me why you didn’t tell me all this before.”

Max went silent.

“Max you owe it to me.” She was insistent.

Max was still silent.

“Listen I am not going to talk to you until you answer me.”

Max knew she had the stubbornness and the strength of will to make good on her threat. He needed her cooperation for both to survive. He relented.

“Excuse me for not telling you sooner but we could not run the risk of you being captured by the WATPOL. If I had told you and you had been

captured they would have been able to drug or drag that information out of you. This way by waiting to tell you, you were safer.”

Cynthia 123 didn't say a word for several minutes but she knew he was right and that she would have to be patient.

She kneeled, reached in to the Fuller Ball and pulled out her survival gear. She started to fold away the Fuller Ball dusting off the sand and cleaning the filter mechanism. It folded into a compact package.

“Aren't you going to talk to me?” Max inquired

She waited a few seconds then responded. “Thanks for being honest with me, Max. I know you mean well but at times I still think you still treat me like a child.”

She walked to the crest of a sand dune, and on the shady side she started to dig her burrow as she had on countless burrows before. Cynthia 123 spread the sand slowly in a random fashion so that the sand had a chance to heat to ambient temperature and not reave a thermal signature. Twenty two minutes later she was sealed into her protective cocoon.

The burrow was just large enough for her to curl up in. The sides were supported by a fine, carbon webbing that was synthesized very much the same way a spider spun a web. The burrow was entered through a narrow channel that she had sealed with small panel of foam that was carried and used for just that purpose. It was electrostatically charged and so the sand

clung to its surface to give the same colour and texture as the surrounding surface.

On the index figure of each hand the envirosuit had a nanoreplicator that generated fine threads of diamond-graphene filament. Cynthia 123 had grown quite adept at spinning intricate webbing with her filament nanoreplicators. She could spin almost anything, from the hardest shield material, to the finest and softest silk.

The nanoreplicator allowed the surface of the fine carbon thread to be set with fine lines that acted like a dispersive surface, allowing different colours to appear depending on the angle.

Whenever she needed some material, cloth or clothing she would simply spin what she needed and anneal it with the tunable ultraviolet microlasers that were on the back of each hand. The elemental- carbon was drawn out of the air so there was a plentiful supply of raw materials.

Her burrow was stark yet utilitarian. The only light was a calming blue luminescence that came from Max. The air she needed to breathe was reprocessed through Max's molecular sieves and scrubbers, and a small series of micro-thin tubes that ran to the foam door on the opening of the burrow. The Carbon dioxide levels were constantly monitored in case she might need to egress the burrow for lack of sufficient oxygen.



Usually she slept when encased within the burrow and as she slept, Max taught her using a telekinetic teaching system built into the helmet. Soft music and instructional audio was also sent to the earphones in her helmet.

Cynthia 123 was a mere metre beneath the surface. Deep enough that she could not be seen by a thermal scanner. If, by chance, anything happened and the burrow were to collapse she was still close enough to the surface that she would be able to tunnel her way out. Like a primordial mammal, she always made sure her burrow was just at the right depth so that she was neither too hot nor too cold. Even though Max controlled her envirosuit this was a luxury she allowed herself.

Her few belongings were laid neatly in a circle around her in case she had to reach for them in the night. She had gotten used to living below ground as much as she had gotten used to living above ground.

“You must be tired.” Max was trying to get her to sleep. He knew they would have to continue their long journey after dark. “It’ll have dinner waiting for you when you wake up.” He began to stimulate her sleeping centre with alpha waves.

“Fine.” She closed her eyes and began to conjure up a dream. She had been waiting for her sleep period. During her many years of exile in the desert she had taught herself to dream on demand. Her dreams filled half of what would have been a lonely existence with real and imaginary friends. Max filled the other half .

All throughout the day she had been thinking of the commander. As she fell further into sleep visions of him walking invitingly towards her filled her dreams. She had forgotten he was her enemy. All she could remember was he was a man.

To some extent, and unbeknownst to her, Max could see into her dreams. It was a way for him to teach her, as much as a way for him to measure her wellbeing.

When her alpha rhythm indicated she had reached REM sleep, Max began to notice a minute change to her EEC and EEG. New rhythms were mixed in with familiar ones. He studied the data real-time and hoped she wasn't coming down with something. He had noticed how quiet she had been during their travel in the Fuller Ball.

She was very restless. Her breathing was irregular. Her body temperature was slightly higher than normal for this time of her cycle. As she slept this evening he sensed a different level of arousal.

After several- hours had already passed Max still had no definitive model for the psychological changes she was undergoing. The trauma of leaving the familiar locale of the condenser, mixed with the challenges ahead and the fulfillment of her curiosity left Max uncertain as to how best to Fast Fourier Transform her EEC and EEG. If he could feel frustrated he would. Perhaps by the time she awoke he will have a coarse algorithm, he thought.

Max knew he could not dwell on this for long. More important things awaited him. He began to instruct the von Neumann nanoreplicators on the dinner menu. It wasn't much, but it was enough to survive.

## Chapter Eleven – ROV to the Rescue

The remote piloted transportation drone homed in on Alpha two six's locational beacon. The ROV's IFF beacon chirped on the radar screen in the command centre atop the giant hovercraft.

The NavO had heard of these machines but this was the first time he had actually seen one in operation. Not that he could actually see it. It travelled so high and so fast no human eye could follow one as it arced through the sky. Without landing the hypersonic drone is designed to release its cargo by paraglider to a specific landing site far below.

“Alpha two six this is fleet command. You should have the ROV in your vicinity, over.”

“This is alpha two six that is affirmative. We have it on our PPL, over.” The ROV chirped its way across the screen passing over the centre and off the edge in less than a minute.

The drone dropped out of hypersonic just long enough to safely release its two cargos, before thundering away to the east. The cargo paraglider opened sharply and guided the small cargo container to a landing within a few tens of feet from the hovercraft.

The second missile fell silently through the air for a moment before fluttering apart like a giant flower. Amidst its debris sprung a pair of sensors

beneath two nearly invisible helium balloons. The passive surveillance sensors, known as '*Floaters*', would drift unobserved at great height gathering real-time intelligence. If there were rebels to be found these imperceptible guardians would sense and locate them.

“Alpha two six this is fleet command. Packet sitrep on milnet four at your soonest.”

“Roger, alpha two six out.”

The NavO flipped the switch to internal. "Chief, NavO. Your package has arrived by paraglider. It has landed off the starboard beam. How soon before you can get us underway. I still haven't heard back from the commander. We're running out of time. "

“NavO ... depending on the state of the replacement I could have you underway in under an hour.”

“Expedite, chief, I am worried about the commander!”

“So am I ... Roger that.”

The chief was exhausted by the time he had recovered the package. It weighed nearly twice his weight and had been packaged in a jury rigged hardened cargo container. He didn't want to risk contaminating the replacement main bus intervolt conduit by opening the container so he lifted

the whole thing onto the ATV and then transported the heavy container back to the hovercraft.

He had already removed the damaged unit and had cleaned the leads. The new unit slipped easily into place. By all appearances it was scavenged off another craft. He instructed the mainframe to begin a diagnostic of the replacement part.

“NavO, I have the replacement unit in place. The mainframe is conducting a diagnostic. with any luck we will be underway in a half hour or so.

“Fine chief . That’s the best news I have had in several hours.”

The mainframe had el-even hundred test points to run through to complete the diagnostic. The test points meshed into each other like a giant matrix with over one point two million permutations. It took the computer six minutes to finish the diagnostic. While he waited for the diagnostic to be completed the chief placed the main propulsion units on stand-bye.

The main propulsion units were a thrill to start. They were giant hydrogen powered gas turbines each with a diameter of over his height. There were six of them in his engine room and when they started up they sounded like six banshees warming up for shouting match.

Once they got started they sang smoothly together. He knew every foible each of the turbines had, right down to the individual floating bearings on number three which he had just repacked last month.

When the mainframe finished its diagnostic he reached over to tighten down the bus intervolt cover. He flipped the switches to start the coolant pumps and satisfied they were functioning properly he returned to the main propulsion control console.

The control console was located in a sound and vibration proof booth towards the front of his engine room. Turning to the main console the chief touched the command >START ALL< and the automatic sequencer took over. The high pitched singing began and soon his six beauties were alive once again.

“NavO, we’re up and running on all six. However, I would not recommend we proceed above 50% power until I have had the chance to more fully test the replacement intervolt.”

“Ok chief. Fifty percent it is. You have earned your keep chief. We should be at the condenser in eighteen minutes.”

The chief sat back and smiled. He looked at the clock and realized he had no sat for nearly five hours and had missed lunch. But he didn’t mind that.

The commander was more buoyant than the NavO, but no matter how reluctant he was to give praise, the NavO had made his day, his week, his month with ‘*You have earned your keep chief.*’

## Chapter Twelve – What's Going On?

Roger 098 was alone except for the now silent condenser towering over him. Throughout the day he drifted in and out of consciousness. In his delirium he had had a vision of an angel descending from the sky.

When the crew of Alpha two six finally found him he was foaming at the mouth and hallucinating wildly. They found him naked and curled up in the fetal position. His clothes and equipment were haphazardly scattered all around him. As far as they could see nothing was missing. If he had been attacked by rebels they would have expected to find him dead and his pistol and other equipment, including his envirosuit missing.

In the state he was in, they found a giant mystery. He kept on mumbling something about an angel that had descended from the sky. The NavO and the Chief had to hold him down and administer a double dose of T-6 to subdue him. They thought that he had sun stroke and had gone around the bend. They took him aboard the Hovercraft, gave him the standard treatment for advanced heat prostration and restrained him to his bunk.

With the Commander in the state he was in, he was, at least temporarily, unfit for command. The NavO sent back a medical sitrep which resulted in the order that he take temporary command of the Hovercraft. Fleet HQ also sent orders that no stone be left unturned to find the condenser's 'Keeper'. The NavO was ordered that the search for the missing 'Keeper' would take precedence over the medical situation with the Commander.



Those bastards, the NavO thought. They're going to run the risk of the Commander dying but for what? A scrawny kid! He went up two flights of stairs to the medical compartment to check on the Commander before stepping out into the desert. After checking that the saline drip was set correctly he checked the commander's pulse and blood pressure before he keyed in the remote alert code for the medical console and checked his wrist console was synchronized with the medical console. Then he tested the alarm. The high pitch shrill filled the air.

Almost immediately the chief's voice came over the intercom. "NavO ... what's going on?"

"Chief it is just me testing the medical alarm ... the commander is fine. He is asleep and rehydrating. His delirium has died down."

"Roger ...", the chief was much better off working with his machines than he was with people.

Satisfied that the commander was safe to leave alone the NavO left the medical compartment and made his way down to the equipment bay and then outside into the desert. He chose not to wear an envirosuit but a good hat and enough sun screen for a twenty minute foray.

The chief was just finishing skinning the dead rattler when the NavO appeared.

“How did it die? The commander was in no state to defend himself.”

The chief picked up the skeleton of the snake and the NavO could see that the snake’s head had all but been severed from the rest of its spine. “The best I can make it out, someone picked it up by its tail and gave it a good flick.”

The NavO took the snake from the chief and took a closer look at the spine. There was no indication of a knife serration.

The chief continued. “The skin will make a damned good belt”, the chief said before tossing the carcass into the sun. “Look.” The chief pointed up to the grapheme solar panels. “Someone set the panels as a sun screen to protect the commander. Whomever did this, did not want to harm the commander, quite the opposite.”

He next pointed to the ground. “It also looks like they poured water over him to keep him cool.”

“I see ...”, the NavO ran his bare hand along the sand. He dug up a handful. It still felt a little moist. The NavO threw the sand down and stood up “You are right.”

“What next?” The chief hoped they had been ordered back to base.

“As long as the commander is out of danger, we have orders to continue with our mission.”

“NavO, what about the skipper?”

“His needs will have to wait.” The NavO turned to study the condenser. The condenser stood silent.

“She ain’t functioning NavO. Try as hard as we can we can’t draw water out of reservoir tank number three. Nor any of the other tanks. The whole system is shut down and we have been locked out!”

“Damn. What about the ‘Keeper’?”

“I have searched everywhere for any sign of her, but I have turned up only a few foot prints around where we found the commander, and that’s it.”

The NavO pointed away from the condenser. And what about out there, in the sun?”

“Keep your shirt on sir. I did a 200 foot perimeter search. Nothing! She’s disappeared.”

“She can’t just have disappeared without a trace. Maybe she is hiding inside.”

“I set an acoustic sensor onto the condenser’s baseplate.” The chief scanned his wrist console. “Right now the only thing it is registering is our footprints, and a few seismic signals, but there is no movement, no

heartbeat, no breathing, nothing coming out from within the condenser. She ain't inside!"

"What's your take to how far your sensor can detect footprints in the desert?"

"A good five to eight miles."

"And?"

"Nothing ... nada ... there is no trace of the 'Keeper'."

"What a fine mess. The condenser is out of commission, the girl has disappeared and the only two things we have to show for this mission is a dead snake and one mother of a crazy commander. They're going to have our heads for this." The chief shrugged his shoulders. "Carry on chief." They exchanged salutes.

The NavO reentered the hovercraft and went to the command centre. He sat for several minutes thinking before he drafted and sent in a flash sitrep. The NavO was told to remote from the medical compartment. The Chief Medical Officer at Fleet HQ came on and consulted with him about the commander's condition. A sample of blood was drawn and analyzed by the haemeograph. The DistMed link gave the CMO at Fleet a great deal to think about. Until the blood sample was cleared the CMO ordered an immediately ordered a quarantine on Roger 098.

“What's up Doc?” The NavO though a little humour might help to ease the tension.

The Doc would have none of it. “I am ordering a quarantine just in case what he had is contagious.”

“Shit!”

“Good idea! I’ll want his urine samples as well.”

“Doc ... It’s just a figure of speech.”

“You have your orders.” The Doc punched out.

The NavO was left staring at a blank console. “God damn it. Next they’ll want me to change his diapers! I didn't go to Fleet school for this!” With great reluctance he did what he was told. He thought, well if the places were reversed the commander would be doing the same for him.

He sent a message saying the samples were now ready and after a wait of nearly an hour the NavO was finally given new orders.

“Alpha Two Six return to fleet HQ at your best speed. We suspect rebels had damaged the condenser and had rendered it inoperative. Fleet HQ also reached the conclusion that the ‘Keeper’ – Cynthia 123 – either by her own free will or by force, was with the rebels. “

Someone had breached security by releasing her name. He finally had a name to put to the face. By all accounts the girl seemed the key to the whole matter.

Cynthia 123, herself, knew nothing of this. She was safely hidden away below ground many kilometres south of her former home. When the hypersonic transport drone had rocketed overhead earlier in the day, Max had detected its side-looking synthetic aperture radar early enough for them to power down and escape detection.

The IFF from the ROV had told Max all he needed to know about the craft since the download he had pinched from alpha two six listed IFF signature A769OQ as a Mark 6 Hypersonic drone, mode of propulsion – pulse wave detonation. This was confirmed later in the day when Max intercepted the NavO's sitrep to WATPOL HQ. He also suspected they would launch "Floaters."

"Cynthia 123."

"Yes Max."

"It is almost dusk. I thought you might want to know that Roger 098 was rescued by the crew of alpha two six nearly two hours ago. Our deception seems to have worked because the hovercraft has been ordered back to fleet HQ."

"What was it that flew over several hours ago?" She asked.

“Oh.” He paused to feign surprise, “how did you know?” Max was not too convincing.

“Well, even though I was half asleep and two feet underground I could still hear the rumble. It seemed to be travel-ling very fast.”

“It was a hypersonic transportation drone with a combined- cycle ram jet engine. I followed its synthetic aperture radar as it flew overhead. I estimate its speed at Mach nine and its altitude as 100,000 feet.”

“Do you think it detected us?” She asked.

“I don’t think so. Just in case I powered down and if the SAR penetrated into the ground we probably look like a buried corpse. The hypersonic transportation drone probably launched a Floater so we will have to be very careful.” Max tried to sound optimistic but he still knew there was a slim chance their track could be made out by the SAR, or they might no escape detection as they made their way across country.

“What’s a Floater?” She was worried. The term sounded ominous.

In his most soothing tone Max explained what a Floater was, and how it collected intelligence. He then explained why he thought they were not at risk provided they moved at night and with stealth. This newly learned information piqued her interest.

Having set her mind at rest about the risk Cynthia 123 showed her newly found curiosity towards science. It surprised Max when she added "... and what does it mean speed at Mach?"

Max answered. "Mach is a fancy way of saying the speed of sound. Mach nine means the craft was travelling at nine times the speed of sound. "

"That's pretty fast!"

"In terms of our slow speed, it is fast." Max continued with his explanation. Despite many years of interaction with Cynthia 123, he had not as yet realized where to stop his explanations.

"The speed of sound depends on the air temperature, and air density as well as its compressibility and the Reynold's number. To first approximation the velocity of sound is equal to the square root of the compression factor multiplied by the Reynold's number and temperature in degrees Kelvin divided by the atmospheric molar density. "

"Oh." She tried to interrupt him but he continued his explanation oblivious to her consternation. .

"At the standard pressure and temperature found at sea level the speed of sound is about 350 metres a second. At higher altitude, due to the reduced atmospheric temperature and molar density the speed of sound is less than



that at sea level. Mach nine at the altitude of the hypersonic transportation is approximately two thousand and seven hundred metres per second.”

“Oh. That's pretty fast!” Cynthia 123 could not really imagine such speeds. To her, after staying in one place for so long, any travel was shock enough, but to travel at two thousand and seven hundred metres per second was incredible. She shook her head. “How can we hope to escape such technology?”

Max tried his hand at humour and answered with a slight drawl. “We’ll manage. Despite all their technology they still are no match to us. With your mobility and my cunning we’ll escape.”

“They managed to catch me once before.”

Max interjected, “but then you didn’t have me to help. Now you do.”

She smiled. “When the hypersonic transportation flew over I thought I heard a second explosion as well.”

“It was the leading and trailing edge compression discontinuity.”

“What?” She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Have you not heard of a sonic boom?” Max was genuinely surprised.

“No I haven’t. I wish you would stop trying to show how smart you are. It’s no fair when I have to learn everything and while you had everything given to you in the way of programming.” She was getting angry at Max for his know it all attitude.

“I guess you do not want me to try to explain how we can measure the length of the vehicle based on its reading and trailing edge compression discontinuity, and its relative velocity?” Max noticed the look of annoyance on her face and decided not to discuss the matter further. He had other more important thoughts to process.

The image processing algorithms that the WATPOL had at their disposal could image a rabbit’s trail from orbit. The trail left behind by the Fuller Ball, although faint, might still be made visible with the right processing algorithm. Max suspected that the right Maximum Entropy Algorithm could do the trick.

The faster they could distance themselves from the condenser the better. For every extra kilometer they put between themselves and their former home added thousands of square miles the Floater would have to search to find them. Even then, the false positives would slow them down even further.

For both of them he hoped the SAR on the Floater drone was tasked to look for something else, somewhere else.

After a few moments of silence she broke the silence. “How is the Commander?” His image was so vivid in her mind that she had to know.

“He’s alive thanks to you. I think he will make a recovery.” Max was stretching the facts to hide the reality that the Commander was badly injured. Max had been monitoring the DistMed link. He put the odds of the Commander surviving as even, but Max knew that the Commander would face many months of medical care before he could look after himself again. Max kept this from her because he knew this would upset her.

“Are they after us?”

“They have been searching high and low for us but have not as yet found our tracks. We might just make it, although I know they will continue to search.” He was being falsely optimistic. He knew the odds were not presently in their favour. Based on his master’s stochastic modelling of their predicament he knew it would be several weeks before they too would stand a better than even chance of survival.

“It was not particularly wise of you to help the Commander like that.”

“I don’t want to get into a long, drawn out philosophical discussion with you,” she snapped back.

“Listen here, young lady. I don’t want you risking your life for nothing. If you died because of my neglect my Master would disconnect me for sure. I don’t want that to happen!”

"Listen, Brainiac! My father once told me it is easier to kill a man than to save him. Only fools kill. It takes two men an hour to dig a grave. An injured foe requires a lot more attention and care than just two grave diggers. For someone whose is supposedly so bright you should be able to figure that out."

"So you're saying it was for a moral reason you helped him. It had nothing to do with your innate curiosity perhaps?"

"That, Max, is none of your business!" She was angry at him because she knew he was half right. No matter how hard she tried to do the right thing, her decisions were so difficult. Nothing was cut and dry.

Max decided not to press the point but to consider the comparative human resource allocation stratagems of death over injury. He concluded she had a valid point, and chastised himself for not having reached that conclusion independently.

For Cynthia 123, alone and defenseless in the middle of the desert, intellect and stealth was her only two means of defence. If she was found armed it would mean summary execution. From this point onwards Max concluded she would move only at night.

Max had reconfigured her thermal signature to diffuse downwards in a two metre wide cone. Provided she did not stand in one place more than a few seconds her thermal discharge would not register in any infrared surveillance

sensor. The soles of her shoes had also been reconfigure to deaden any sound emissions.

“Time to leave your burrow.”

She slowly lifted herself from the narrow confines of her underground shelter. She cautiously broke the surface. As she looked to the west the setting sun turned the horizon into several wonderful shades of yellow and crimson. Towards the east the Purkinje effect turned the sky bright blue. When she was very young, B’jabber once spent an entire evening telling her about how the dawn and the dusk distorts the illusion of depth, colour and perspective.

The stars and planets had already begun to appear in the night sky. “You want me to travel at night? Max how will I see in the dark?”

“Your diet is high in Beta-Carotene as it is.”

“Ummm.” She had no idea what Max was alluding too.

“You should have more faith in me.” Max sensed her confusion. In a spectacular display of colour and contrast the inner face of her faceplate lit up.

“My god, what is it?” she gasped.

“It is a full-colour translucent active matrix thin-film liquid crystal heads up display. What I am showing you are the thermal signature of the land around us, as well as the required navigational information you will need to make your way across the desert at night.”

“Incredible. Boy when you have surprises to share with me they’re always big ones. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s almost like a work of art.” She paused to admire the colours. “What do the numbers in the top right hand corner mean?”

“This is your heading in geographic degrees true.”

“What do the numbers in the top left hand corner mean?”

“They indicate the distance travelled from a waypoint.”

“What’s a way point.” Cynthia 123 had never heard that expression before.

“A waypoint is a specific location on the map, or topography. For instance, when we start our trek this evening, our starting point is a way point. We will trek from one way point to the next, then to the one after that .... Until we get to where we need to get on this leg of our journey.” This evening I have seven way points planned, each separated by approximately 2 miles.”

“I am going to walk fourteen miles tonight?”

“Yes ... in a little under six hours. Beneath the distance travelled data you should see a clock.”

“Yes I do. And the numbers in the lower right and left hand corners?”

“The number in the right hand corner is the distance to your next waypoint and the number in the left hand corner is the waypoint number. “

“How do I use all this information? I don’t know the first thing about navigation.”

“The visuals are to assist you during our trek. Trust me to do the navigating. If you have any questions just ask me. We should be able to travel fourteen miles planned for this evening and as you get used to travelling at night we should be able to average over twenty miles a leg.

“Fine Max ... lead me to your master. What heading should I take?” She felt game to give it a try.

“Our heading is due West, 270.”

Cynthia 123 knelt down to retrieve her survival gear from her burrow. She left a monofilament marker, a synthetic feather that is visible in UV light at the entrance in case she ever needed to use this burrow again.

In the brief time it took Max to explain the thin-film liquid crystal display the sun had set below the horizon and the sky had darkened to black. Even

with Max to guard her Cynthia 123 felt terribly vulnerable and lonely. Sure, she had Max to rook after her but that didn't seem enough. She had not felt this lonesome since her first day as a 'Keeper' more than five years ago.

She missed her home and the security it brought her. Certainty in a young girl's life was very important. Now, the unknown was the only certainty she had in her life. I guess from now oh, she thought, I will have to get used to this again.

She began to walk very slowly. "Max?"

"Yes?"

"In all the years you have looked over me f don't think I have ever really thanked you.tt

"That is true. But my Master said to expect this from humans."

His ignoble response was totally unexpected by her. She stumbled. "I can't see that well even with your help. Can't you do something." His quip had angered her. "If I am not careful I may turn an ankle and then where will we be?"

Max deliberated for two nanoseconds then reconfigured the Bragg diffraction grating, and repositioned the Fabry-Perot etalon on the microlaser on her right hand.



"Try your right hand."

She pointed her right hand in front of her and the ground ahead began to glow with a deep ultra-violet hue. The ground seemed to come alive with scurrying figures fluorescing a bright yellow green. She screamed.

"Max what are they?" She stopped in her tracks and stood perfectly still.

"They are sand scorpions, *Paruroctonus mesaensis*, a nocturnal inhabitant of the desert. They look fierce but I doubt they can do us any harm."

"Aren't they poisonous?" She didn't want to move in case Max was wrong.

"They are venomous, but their stingers are not strong enough to penetrate my skin and cause you harm. They are sensitive to vibration in the sand."

"How come I have never seen them before?"

"They are migrating North. Another year or two and they would have made it to the condenser."

She took a careful step forward. One of the scorpions turned forty five degrees to face her. She stopped. "I don't like this. " Panic gripped her. She started to hyperventilate.

The scorpion had detected both compression and Rayleigh waves from a very massive and mobile target. It instinctively stopped its tunnelling for the

desert burrowing cockroach, *Arenivaga Investigata*, that it sensed beneath its eight feet. The cockroach would have to wait.

“Remember the first time you saw the desert beetle?” Max was trying to help her act sensibly.

“Yes.” Her throat was so tight and her head so dizzy from her breathing that the word barely formed on her lips.

The animal had stopped moving but the seismic effect of its breathing and braying was enough to give its position away. The mechanoreceptors in the scorpion's left tarsal leg segments registered the subtle vibrations in the substrate.

“You did not like them then, but with time you got to know and understand the desert beetle. Eventually you’ll stopped fearing them.”

The kilohertz signal was getting stronger as the scorpion concentrated its attention on the animal. Its slit sensillum detected the minute movement of the sand. It rotated ten more degrees to the right and took six steps towards Cynthia 123.

“So?” She paused. “It’s charging towards me.”

“Come on move your feet we haven’t all night!” Max was trying hard to get her on her way.

She took a step forward. The scorpion raised its rear and arched its sting towards her. It took four more steps forward as it honed in. "I think it's going to strike." She was petrified.

"Keep perfectly still-." Max knew they had nothing to fear from the stingers, but he also knew how frightened she was. Her body temperature, blood pressure and pulse rate were elevated and the sweat glands on her skin were starting to secrete. Max knew he had to do something to comfort her. It came to him in a flash.

It took a nanosecond to access the file. While he searched the parallel processor in the left boot began to reconfigure its sole. Even before the entire file had been accessed and transferred Max set the sole of her left feet vibrating to a vaguely familiar rhythm.

For several metres the compression and Rayleigh waves radiated in all directions. As if by magic, the Scorpions encircling Cynthia 123 began to dance excitedly in a gyrating ballet. One scorpion tussled another, hoisted its stinger and struck. Then two more and in an instant the ground was alive with the frenzy of death unleashed by Max's cunning.

The frenzy was too extraordinary for her to follow. The bodies of the scorpions entwined together into a giant ball. One by one a mortally wounded anthropods fell from the cotillion. In a few minutes the battle ground was littered with the corpses of the weak and inferior until only one scarred but triumphant scorpion remained.

The victorious scorpion pranced to and fro, opening and closing its pedipalps searching for an adversary. There was no other scorpion left alive to challenge him. The battle had been engaged, fought and terminated in the crack of a few scant minutes.

When it found no opponent, in its frenzied madness it arched its tail over and struck its own head. The venom sent the mighty scorpion into convulsions that seemed more an ecstasy than agony. It spun around in wild circles. It swayed its tail to and fro in ever slowing spirals until . only the tip of its stinger danced. Then it was still, like a prehistoric samurai that had had committed ritual seppiku.

Cynthia 123 watched the entire battle and its dramatic ending in awe. She kicked at the last warrior, but it did not move. "Why did he do that?"

"Scorpions live to fight ... nothing else mattered. He knew he had won over all his opponents and therefore his life was forfeit. Without an enemy to vanquish the scorpion was nothing. "

"Scorpions are so stupid."

"Scorpions don't have to be intelligent to survive. After all they are at the bottom of the food chain and thrive by very primitive means. But, you know," he hesitated, "they say roasted they don't taste that bad."

"God Max, don't gross me out." She started to bolt towards the West.

“At times you’re so much like the boys I grew up with.”

“Thanks I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant as one.”

For several minutes she continued at top speed until she tripped over a bush and fell.

“Are you o. k.?” Max was just getting used to using the vernacular.

She felt like she needed some peace and quiet. Cynthia 123 really didn’t want to talk with him. She picked herself up, puffing and weazing off the ground. At times he made her very upset. “You know Max. I like you and all, but sometimes you drive me crazy.”

“What did I do?” Max was sincerely confused.

“Who in their right mind would eat roasted scorpions?”

“The nomads of the Sahara.”

She did not respond. That was the last thing she wanted to hear. Damned if he is going to turn me into a nomad, she thought. The fury was growing inside of her.

He sensed a jump in her blood pressure. “Is that what is bothering you?” Max was trying hard to engage her in conversation. Without it he could not know what was on her mind. This day had left him with too much confusing data. He had to know what she was thinking. “I have to teach you about such things in case you ever are without me. 'I

"Fine.” She started to walk in measured paces. She checked her heading. Two six seven. “Next time keep the scorpion recipes to yourself.”

Max dressed his voice in the most sincere speech synthesized routine in his vocal repertoire. “Yes, next time I think I will.”

She continued on silently. Max thought wisely not to interrupt her introspection. So much had happened to her this day. The man, the exodus from her home of five years, a day trek through the scorching sun, a night trek through the now dark and frigid desert, rattle snakes, beetles and scorpions! She had half forgotten, but half of her did not want to see what lay ahead. After all, what she could not see could not hurt her.

Reluctantly she raised her right hand and shone the UV light in front of her. Except for the occasional flash of bright yellow-green nothing seemed out of the ordinary as she walked.

“Curse you Max. Next you'll have me wearing a jellaba!"

He needed to change the subject. “Are you hungry?"

Almost spitting her words she retorted. “No. You’ve managed to ruin my appetite.”

They continued in silence. In a few hours it would be morning and at the pace she was walking they probably would make the distance before it was time again to hide away.

“Mind your step.” Perhaps if he showed concern she would open up.

She knew what he was up to. Listen Max I don't want to talk right now.”

“If you need to I am here. I will play some chess in the meantime.”

She snapped back. “Some relief that is.”

After all she had been thorough, Max thought it best to let her have the last word.

She marched on.

## Chapter Thirteen – As If In a Dream

The daily cycles of life drifted in his self-consciousness, more like a dream than anything else. The rising and setting of the sun was all but forgotten. Time had stopped for him.

Things long lost floated through his mind. Where he was he did not know. Where in time, where in space, where in action was a puzzle wrapped in the fog that entrapped his mind. It was a fog that had no escape. He did not seem to mind. After all he was at peace.

He was at peace with himself and his surroundings. Something made him feel that this was better than the state he had of late escaped from. He sensed that it had been a long time since he was at peace in any way.

In his dream he travelled an endless distance, without goal or purpose. He could hear murmuring. He could feel, at least he thought he could. As time passed he began to doubt he was even alive.

Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps his consciousness had escaped his body. How else can he explain the angels? Perhaps there was a soul and he was its embodiment. After all, who really knew what happened after death. If he was dead he did not even care.

What he was he did not care to know either. In his vision he slithered along the desert floor. Ominous shadows would descend around him. For reasons



unknown, less understood, he next danced through the sky before falling to the ground below, broken, twisted, defeated.

But, no matter where he seemed to be the visions of angels would find him, float with him and tease him incessantly. First there was one, then two then four. They multiplied in a geometric series that soon filled his mind completely. They did not seem to threaten him. But they did torment him if only by sheer numbers. They were both logic and illogic wrapped together in one.

Angels were for the dead. If he was with angels then he must be dead. If he were dead how could he then dream of angels? Like a snake chasing its tail, his logic chased around and consumed itself. The torment was ringed.

What could he know for certain? He could not know he was dead. He could not know he was not dead. All he knew was that he had a throbbing headache. If he could feel pain perhaps the fog would lift and the torment would end.

He did not know what brought him back to consciousness. Perhaps it was a whisper in his ear, or the touch of a cold hand. Whatever it was that lifted the fog Roger 098 suddenly opened his eyes. A bright light shocked his optic nerve. His iris could not adjust quick enough and so for a moment he tried unsuccessfully to focus. There were strange blurs all around him but he could not make out any shapes or any motion. His eyes began to water and so he decided it was best to keep them close.

Although his eyes were closed his other senses slowly came alive. There was the smell of alcohol, methanol, mind you, and a sweet aroma that he could not quite place. His ears could just make the soft purr of something mechanical. Something soft brushed across his face. He opened his eyes again, but this time more cautiously. The blur of a hand flashed across. Slowly a face appeared, a face so beautiful he thought he must be in heaven.

A soft feminine voice broke the silence. “Ah, you are finally awake Commander. We thought we had lost you for good.”

He tried to focus on the face. He tried to recognize the voice, but without luck. In an instant the face was gone, a smudge in the distance.

The voice continued. “Do not be afraid Commander.” The voice was very calming, almost sweetly so. “You are amongst friends.”

Roger 098 could feel his forehead being softly caressed. He peered into the green eyes of the nurse. “You are in the burn unit of the Fleet hospital. When your friends found you they almost gave up hope. You had a bad sun burn.

Roger 098 tried to speak but they were several tubes in his throat that prevented him from uttering much more than a gurgle. The soft voice continued. “We have nursed you back to health. You are a lucky man, Commander. And a strong man at that! Any lesser man would not have survived trauma. Let me go tell the doctor you are awake.”

Roger 098 nodded and the blur disappeared into the distance. Slowly his eyes began to accustom to his surroundings. When he could finally focus he found himself floating in a vat of aerosol gel. His body was covered with third degree sunburns, but he hardly felt the burns given the drugged state he was in.

Roger 098 felt very weak and somewhat thirsty. After several minutes of concentrated effort his head began to spin, first slowly then faster and faster. He decided to close his eyes and to try to sleep. He was too weak to do much else.

By the time the nurse had returned with the doctor, Roger 098 was fast asleep

When he next awoke the same pretty nurse was again at his side taking his pulse and temperature with a remote probe. The tubes had been taken from his throat. He tried to speak but all that came out of his mouth was a cough and hiss. She looked down and whispered, "Don't talk, save your strength Commander. You have been through a tremendous ordeal." He slowly turned away and fell asleep again.

For the next several days the pattern continued. He would remain conscious for a few minutes then fall into a deep asleep again. When he was finally well enough to stay awake for any period of time they had removed him from the burn unit into one of the other wards. In his new bed he was strapped down.

At first he did not know which ward. No one would answer his questions, not even his nurse. Then one day a Doctor Sharma appeared, introduced himself and sat down in a chair he pulled next to the bed.

“How are you feeling today, Roger 098? My Name is Doctor Ravi Sharma. I have been assigned to undertake your assessment.”

“I have felt better. I have a throbbing headache that doesn’t seem to want to go away and I feel like an over baked potato.” He looked down at his arms. “You seem to have done miracles with my sunburns. How long have I been here and why am I strapped down to my bed?”

“Here in Ward Six, two weeks. Here at Fleet Hospital three months and a of the nature bit. We had to keep you tranquilized because of your burns and your condition. ”

“How come the nurses will not answer my questions? How come they will not let me get up and out of bed ? I feel strong enough.” He hesitated. “Will I ever be able to walk again Doc ?”

“We will talk about that a little later. First we have many questions to ask you.” The Doctor stretched the word ‘we’ in an accusing tone.

Almost on cue the door to his room opened and a smallish man with a bald head and round glasses entered the room. He was carrying a slender black case in his right hand and a small folding chair in his left hand. Another man

entered the room, nipping at the first man's heels, set a remote camera on a tripod at the foot of the bed then left silently.

Roger 098 watched the bald man set up the chair and table down next to the bed and the slender case on the small table beside him. With the routine of a skilled craftsman the odd looking man opened the case and began to lay small instruments on the table just out of Roger 098's view. He tried to turn his head but was not able to see what the instruments were.

Without warning Dr. Sharma stepped forward and pulled Roger 098's gown off his chest, leaving his torso bare and exposed on the bed. This action was so unexpected that the Commander was startled. "What the hell!"

Roger 098 struggled to free his arms and hands. Dr. Sharma barked a command, "Stand down Commander."

The Commander stared first at the Doctor and then down at his naked torso and saw for the first time the extent of his burns. There were bright scars everywhere on him. He had been injured before, but never this badly.

His disfigurement, although repairable by surgery, made him sick to his stomach. Resentment of the Hospital, the Doctor, the instrumentality, everything began to build up inside of Roger 098. Doctor Sharma, perhaps expecting such a reaction, administered a subcutaneous injection.

The tranquilizer began to take effect immediately. Roger 098 felt his concerns drift away above his head. The Doctor broke the awkward silence.

“This gentleman is an examiner. Fleet HQ has instructed that you be interrogated.”

The thought of “interrogation” sent shivers down his spine, a shiver that only worsened the sickening feeling he had in his stomach.

Roger 098’s vision was blurred and his speech slurred but he did manage to turn to the doctor. “What kind of a quack are you.” Then he turned back to the doctor before continuing. “it is not enough to suffer the way that my body has suffered, but now you want to mess with my head?”

All that Doctor Sharma did was smile and turn to leave the room. His sickly smile only added to the Commander’s fury.

Roger 098 yelled as loud as his weakened voice could carry, “I have questions I want answered!” The Doctor, however, had escaped the room before the last word had left his lips. The Commander knew that this situation was out of his hands of Doctor Sharma, but that still wasn’t enough to help him forgive the Doctor for letting this happen to him. After all he had been through, he felt owed an answer.

An examiner was the last thing Roger 098 expected. An examiner was something for prisoners, or rebels, not for celebrated Fleet Officer. Roger 098 felt betrayed to the core. And angry!

The Examiner ignored the commander’s angst and began his work. With the greatest of care he slipped a pressure-cuff over Roger 098’s left bicep until it

was flush with the artery inside his elbow. He inflated the cuff. He next fitted a thin rubber tube across his chest. The examiner ran two thin fibre optic lines from the cuff and the tube back to the slender black case on the table.

He next took two electrodes and placed one on the inside and one on the outside of the commander's left hand. He took another pair of electrodes and placed them on either side of the inside of his thighs. Four more thin fibre optic lines were run back to the slender black case on the table.

The examiner quickly added two more sensors on his chest and two more over his eyes. He took care to avoid placing the sensors on patches of grafted skin. The wretched little man uttered "you are lucky to be alive, Commander", and then continued with his work. The comment hardly seemed as a complement to the Commander. It was just something to fill an otherwise empty moment.

Although the room had begun to spin and his speech was slow and slurred, his fury forced a lucidness and alertness that he sometimes felt after a long night's drinking. More importantly, Roger 098 began to feel trapped. He had visions of electric shocks being administered to his brain and to other vital parts of his body. He had heard stories on how the Dictatorship treated prisoners.

The examiner finished what he was doing and left the room leaving Roger 098 alone. The Commander once again lost all sense of time. Was it a few minutes or a few hours since this nightmare began. He could not know. His

nurse came in to check on him briefly, but she was gone before he could bring himself to speak to her.

He suspected they were playing psychological games with him, but he wouldn't let them win. His training had prepared him for interrogation, but the training was meant to prepare him for mistreatment at the hands of the rebels and not his own people. The thing he could really concentrate his thoughts on was that he was going to make them pay for this.

Visions of the treatment that lay ahead filled his mind. He tried to move. He tried to lift off the sensors. The tranquilizer had taken control. In his drugged and weakened condition the normally athletic Commander was rendered incapable of even letting out a whimper.

They had total control and he knew it. He had no control over his own body. He had no control over his mind. No control over the present, no sense why this was happening and where this would take him. For the second time in his life he felt a prisoner. The first time was when he was a recruit off to training camp. As a recruit all aspects of his life were controlled and were studied. Such a lack of freedom was a feeling that was profoundly distasteful to Roger 098.

He stared into the camera with a blank and empty gaze, and once again wondered what he might have done to deserve this. Had he said one too many comments about the inefficiencies of Fleet HQ? Had he cursed about the general readiness of the Fleet too loudly? Should he have read the Governor's Son the Riot Act for stealing his Fleet equipment?



In his mind he drifted back over the countless moments when perhaps he had said too much. Absorbed in his thoughts he began to panic. He was guilty of something but he could not image what. So absorbed was he that he did not feel the tears that began to stream down his cheeks. He began to sob like a baby.

He did not care who saw him like this or what they thought. They had bared his body, and with the skills of the inquisition they were about to bear his mind. He had trusted them with his life. He had fought for them and been through hell for them and look at what they were doing to him. Nameless and faceless people who could not even face their accused. He slowly raised his head and stared at the camera. An empty stare.

After what seemed like an eternity the door opened and the wretched little man walked silently in. The examiner turned all the lights off in the room except the light that shone directly on Roger 098's face. The light blinded him.

Although the room was temperature controlled the Commander began to sweat profusely. He tasted fear, something he had never tasted before, even in combat. In combat at least he had control over his own actions. Here he was at the mercy of this wretched little man and the nameless and faceless people behind the camera.

The examiner lifted a red syringe and held it in his left hand. The whole of Roger 098's being focused on this sinister tool of inquisition that now

seemed poised for attack. With two deft taps with his right hand the examiner prepared the injection. Bile began to erupt up the commander's throat. He tried to move, he tried to fight his captor. The Commander tried to push the examiner away.

"Hold still Commander or I might break the needle."

The needle pierced the skin on his forearm with an unpleasant burning sensation. Almost immediately Roger 098's head started to clear whilst his body remained immobile.

"The substance is a curare derivative designed to relax your muscles while focussing your mind." The examiner hardly sounded reassuring.

The Commander began to panic and then hyperventilate. Curare!

The examiner began to talk to him in a soothing voice. "I have finished setting up. The drug has taken effect. Commander, I want you to trust me. This is not a situation where you should expect pain or hostility. I am here to help you find the truth. "

The Commander rolled his head and peered into the little man's grey, lifeless eyes. With all his strength and what little coherence left to him the Commander mouthed out a single word. With all his strength he asked "WHY!"

The examiner took no notice of the question. He opened a black binder and set it down in front of himself. In a clearly methodical fashion he began his questions, probing into the mind of Commander of the Fleet Roger 098, the machine and camera recording every word, twitch and pulsation of his captive body.

“Let us begin.” The examiner glanced down at his notes. “What is your name?”

“You know fully who I am.”

“Answer the question. I need to calibrate my instruments Commander so cooperate. Is your name Roger 098?”

“Fleet Commander, you little worm! And the hell with your instruments!” He had decided he was going to fight with the only weapon he had left, his words.

“Now, now Commander. There are important people watching this examination. Try not to offend them. Nothing will be gained by fighting back. ” The examiner looked back at the camera and smiled a slimy little smile.

Roger 098 had heard rumors that important interrogations were simulcast for the Elite. He slowly turned his head towards the camera and spat the words out. “I guess I am tonight's cheap thrill.” It seemed that all he had left was his dignity.

He rolled his head back towards the examiner. “It’s creatures like you that fester under the rocks.”

The examiner pressed a button and a sharp pain racked the commander’s groin. He arched his head back and let out a hideous scream. “Now that we understand each other, let us begin again. “

Roger 098 was perspiring profusely. It took a full minute to compose himself following the jolt. The examiner grabbed his wet hair and lifted the Commander's head off pillow.

The examiner broke the silence . “That was at the lowest intensity. I do hope you will be more cooperative, otherwise we will do this all night. I do not want to hurt you but we have a job to do. We have to find the truth. ”

The commander felt the word ‘we’ jolt his psyche as fiercely as any electrical shock. He felt the bile rise in his throat again. Only once before in his life had he felt the anger he was now feeling. “You have your job, and I have no choice. When he finished saying the words he knew he had made a mistake. How would such a word be construed?

The examiner repeated his question. “What is your name?”

He gathered his strength before answering. “Commander of the Fleet, Roger 098. Serial alpha omega niner null niner six. Citation for bravery in the Amazon Wars, in the Blue Mountain Wars. Head of my class of ...”

“Enough!” Brusquely the examiner cut him off . He had a hand over his left ear. It was then that he noticed the small earphone leading to black box on his belt. Roger 098 figured it was a transceiver to the persons on the other side of the camera. The examiner turned towards the camera and nodded.

“How long have you been a Fleet Officer?”

“Since as long as I remember.” The examiner knew the answer, so he wondered why he would need to ask this obvious question.

“Can you be more precise, Commander?”

He paused before answering. “Twenty two years, twelve months and so many days up until my recent trip into the desert. I have no idea how long I have been here and even whether I still am a Fleet officer ... after all this is no way to treat one.”

The examiner reached over to press the red pain button ... Roger 098 cringed ... He had passed along the not so subtle message to Roger 098, cooperate or else ... Then the examiner drew his hand away. Pain tires you out and he didn't want to tire the Commander just yet. Especially with so many questions that still needed to be answered.

“You are still a Fleet Officer, and shall remain one only as long as you cooperate and answer the questions.” It boomed from the camera and was quite unexpected. The voice startled them both.

“Who is there?” The Commander yelled. “Tell me who you are.” He was staring into the camera.

The examiner turned to the camera and nodded. The examiner pressed the red button. The Commander half expected the shock and let out a belligerent growl like a cornered animal. This time he wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction of screaming.

“Don’t you mind who that is,” the examiner said. “Just answer my questions and we will get this over with quickly.” The examiner had not expected such high spirited resistance from such an infirmed man.

“What is your present assignment?”

“I am assigned here to Ward six, I presume.”

"That is not what I am asking."

“I am the Commander Officer of Hovercraft Alpha Two Six.”

“Why did you leave your Hovercraft on your last assignment?”

“Because I had a mission to accomplish.”

The examiner paused. "Did your mission include going it alone and letting a rebel escape?"

“What rebel? My mission was to go and fetch the ‘keeper’ at the condenser. No one said anything about any rebels. We checked with Fleet intelligence before we set out. You will find they declared the condenser and its surrounding region free of rebel presence. Letting a rebel escape ... I did nothing of the kind ... I let no one escape!”

“Are you denying you left your command?”

“I did not leave my command, I set out to complete the mission we were assigned.” He began to wonder how loyal his crew had been to him. Had they betrayed him? “No. I don’t know what the others are telling you but we suffered a full scale shutdown of our power systems which crippled the hovercraft. I pressed on ahead to secure the condenser and the ‘Keeper’.”

“By yourself?”

"Yes. The chief was hard at work getting the systems back on line and I left the NavO in charge. The chief said he didn’t need my help and the NavO did not have the skill and training to trek across the desert in the blazing sun to the condenser and so I set out by myself.” He wondered what they were getting at. What it was he had done so wrong.

The examiner changed directions with his questions. “Do you remember, Commander, a mission you did for us five years ago? ”

“I have done many missions for Fleet. Which mission are you talking about?”

“When you went after the ‘little one’. “

He paused for a second to recollect. “Yes I now remember. She was caught swimming in the reservoir at New Vegerville. I commanded the battalion that caught her. The last I had heard was that she had been exiled somewhere.”

The examiner check a box on his notes. “Your long term memory seems intact.”

There was an awkward pause then Roger 098 inquired, “so what does it have to do with me?”

The examiner touched his ear with his hand and nodded. He turned to face the Commander and then spoke, “Her name was Cynthia 123.

“Is that her name?” He feigned indifference, but felt an ominous weight on his heart. His increased pulse rate and blood pressure was registered in the examiner’s instruments.

The examiner annotated the readings before continuing his interrogation. “She was the ‘Keeper’ at the condenser. You let Cynthia 123 get away.”

Roger 098 paused for just a split second before responding. This was the first time he had heard her name mentioned. “No I didn’t let her get away. Are you deaf, or just dumb?”



The examiner reached for the button.

The commander tensed waiting for the excruciating pulse of electricity.

Before he could press the red button the voice came from the camera. “You let her get away!”

Roger 098 turned to look at the camera. ”Like I just said, I caught her, she was tried and exiled. I did not know where she had been sent.” He tried to recall what she looked like. “What the hell are you talking about?”

This time the jolt was more intense and completely unexpected. He arched his back and let out a horrifying scream. The pulse lasted several seconds.

When, mercifully it was over, he toppled back onto the bed. The shock had paralyzed his chest muscles. Between coughs he fought for his breath.

The voice at the camera continued. “At the condenser. You let her get away. We needed her. You had orders to bring her back. You failed at your mission.” The word fail- was spat out in disgust.

He did not answer, for he had no answer to give. He didn’t know who the ‘Keeper’ was.

“So what is it you're saying? That I let her get away, that I am a traitor, is that it?” Strangely, his anger was not focused on the girl but on the voice.

For all- his life he had been doing their dirty work. A lot of what he had done for them did not make him proud. He had never given it a second thought, but now that they were treating him like an enemy they were pushing him to the other side of things.

He lifted his head and growled at the camera, "I let no one get away. I have been a good soldier and look at how you are treating me!"

The examiner nodded at the camera and the raised his hand and struck Roger 098 across the face. For a wretched little man he had great strength. Blood began to seep from a cut on his lip.

The examiner took the commander's mouth in his hand and squeezed. "Commander you should be careful with what you say, they are watching you. "

He forced himself to spit out the words. "I don't care. I have had enough of this shit." He prepared himself for another jolt.

When it came it lifted him clear off the bed. He tumbled to the floor, taking the bed with him. The Commander struck the side of his head on the edge of his floor and lost consciousness.

The angel was there to greet him at the other side of his consciousness. He now knew who his friends were. Whatever it took, he was going to find that

girl, the ‘little one’ – Cynthia 123. There were too many questions she had to answer. If the Fleet wouldn’t answer them perhaps she would.

“Why?” he asked the angel.

The angel offered him her hand. “Let me tell you why,” she replied. He took her hand and the two of them walked together into the mist.

## Chapter Fourteen – Watch Out for the Floaters

The spy machine had soared for hours at the mercy of the winds. The Floater had been programmed to drift, unseen and at great height, to ferret out movement and radio activity within a several hundred mile radius of the now inactive Condenser. As it ballooned through the high atmosphere it triangulated its position using fixed ground based radio beacons.

A discone antenna hung beneath the device, sending a steady stream of data to the listening post far to the south. It sent its rear-time data back to Fleet HQ encoded in a data compressed stream that was nearly undetectable to all but the seasoned listener.

The Floater's high resolution telescopes, cameras and high density charged coupled devices tirelessly scanned the terrain in the visual and thermal bands of the electromagnetic spectrum. The spy machine also deployed a supercooled and extremely sensitive Blackbeard payload, a broad-band radio receiver which it used to characterize and record radio emissions.

Although designed to be invisible, the machine left a thin contrail of ice-crystals high in the atmosphere where the air snaked past the supercooled detectors. The contrail was caused by a tiny crack in the thermoplastic insulation surrounding the supercooled Helium reservoir, a crack that had been the result of rough handling by the ground crew.

From the ground the contrail left a thin white track. After only two hours the Helium began to boil and vent to atmosphere creating a string of pearls that pointed to the silent machine. The Floater began to spin with each puff of Helium. There were no eyes raised to the heavens to watch the white string of pearls as it was painted across the sky for nothing below seemed out of the ordinary.

Beyond the overwhelming number of desert beetles and the occasional rattle snake. No other movement was detected beyond that of the expected WATPOL patrol and the occasional dust storm. No activity could be found anywhere near the condenser. The Blackbeard payload measured no unusual radio activity either.

After a period of twelve hours the Floater's batteries began to run down. Following its pre-programming, it self-destructed in a cloud of super-secret debris.

The only legacy the Floater left behind were two optical disks of raw data at Fleet HQ and a snow of high tech junk that slowly settled to the ground near the condenser. The area around New Vegerville had a low priority in the grander scheme of things. Back at Fleet HQ the raw data was left unprocessed. Rebel activities further south was getting much of the attention of intelligence analysts.

The morale of the Fleet had fallen appreciably with the rumoured abandonment of lead positions in the New Vegerville area. Scuttlebutt had it

that the rebels had destroyed several of the important water condensers in the area in their bid to overthrow the local Governor.

With all the activity elsewhere, the data lay forgotten for nearly twenty hours until an over eager Rank Two digital image programmer decided to process the forgotten optical disks. He had come across the disks in a pile marked ‘processed pending.’

At the end of his fifth shift in his cycle of five on/two off the programmer stole away to a spare imaging workstation and began to analyze the two erasable optical disks of raw data. Ever since the last of the advanced imaging satellites had failed there was less than the normal chaos of processing to be done. Several of the imaging workstations remained empty during each shift, their crew reassigned elsewhere.

Using the standard processing algorithms he began to sift through the images first SAR, then passive EM. Even after a cursory review of the images he could find nothing in the visual and ultraviolet. Frustrated he was about to discard the disks when something odd caught his eye.

While studying the handful of image anomalies that had been flagged by the Fleet Optical Processing Mainframe, he noticed a faint track in the sand. The closer he studied the more he felt that the track was not a quirk of nature.

In his deception to get the two of them away Max had thought of nearly everything except the most basic rule of Quantum Physics the theorem of

linear states. When two states are a solution of the wave equations their addition is also a solution of the wave equation.

In the far infrared Cynthia 123 had left a calling card so subtle that it took quantum mechanics and a super computer to find it. The two edges of Cynthia 123's Fuller Ball track was exactly an integral number of wavelengths apart. The reflected light in the far infrared had constructively interfered leaving a track that could be followed by the right tracking algorithm.

The Floater had picked this track up but catalogued it has an optical-anomaly. It took a human programmer to find it out.

After a seven hour effort the Rank Two programmer knew he had done good. There was no being passed up for promotion now.

Using Fleet HQ intranet the programmer filed the images with his supervisor. Attached to the processed images was the blunt message that he would have found the track sooner if he had been given the data earlier. He also informed his supervisor that he would follow the anomalous track to its source.

Rubbing his eyes after a long night at his console, he knew he had upped the ante with his boss. He had to find the source and capture it or his promotion, even his job was at stake.

Here, within the supersecret Fleet HQ intelligence section failure was not tolerated for failure meant obscurity even disappearance. Within the section the brightest, best and most trusted held sway, or else were not seen again. The macabre joke in the Fleet HQ intelligence section was on the wall above the programmer, "Those that burnt twice as long burnt half as bright."

The Rank Two programmer went home feeling he wasn't, in the words of his supervisor, a low watt light-bulb. He knew he had the promotion in the bag. He slept well that night and began to dream as to how he would catch the mysterious source of his anomalous tracks.



## Chapter Fifteen – On Her Trek

The trek had been long and arduous but she was glad it was almost over. She had walked many days in the desert hinterland before seeing the landscape change. After twenty days they had come across the first marsh, her first tree, her first wildlife.

Her education had, of course, continued. To Max it appeared the travel had broken her routine. She had become more inquisitive and more curious as to why things are the way they are, and not some other way.

Max knew that one day she would be like this. After all it was clear in his psychological profile of her that her father's genes were strong. Those genes just had to be drawn out.

Growing up with her mother had made the maternal patterns too dominant. The best that Max could remember as to when she finally came to it of her own was the day she took up the game of chess. It was a game her father excelled at, yet was despised by her mother. It reminded her of him, and the reminder was too bitter for her to endure. Cynthia 123 had once asked her mother about the strange game she kept but did not play. It reminded her of him, is all she said, before tears welled into her eyes.

Not having anything to share with each other Max and Cynthia 123 had been walking quietly for several hours. The sun had begun to set and Max had already decided that they would not continue their journey after dark. He had

been playing out several grand master games when she asked him about the game. The question, and what followed was so unexpected.

“Max. Why do you play this game of chess? It doesn’t seem to have a purpose except to pass time.”

“Actually it has a very good purpose.”

“And just what is that?”

“Chess is one of the best ways to learn how to think.”

“So does a lot of other things.” Many times before she had belittled his pastime, but today she did not feel like mocking him. For once she wanted to learn more about his game.

“The game of chess is about strategy and logic. It is a very old game first played in the seventh century in India.”

“That long ago!”

“Yes. It was first known as Chaturanga, a Sanskrit word referring to the four elements of an army elephants, horses, chariots and foot soldiers.”

“Max, when I watch you play your games you don’t play with elephants. “

“That is true. The game has changed considerably over the centuries. From India, chess made its way to Persia and thence to Europe in the eleventh century, when the Arab conquered Spain.”

“So you are saying chess is a game of war?”

Max felt he had captured her interest. “You could say that. That is why the Indians first played their Chaturanga, but as a game it is a great deal more than just a contest of wits. “

“So what is it?”

“It is a contest of mind and of cultures. When the first great treatise of chess was published in Europe in 1265 by Alfonso El Sabio, king of Leon and Castile, used it as a diplomatic tool to end bloodshed between the Moors and the Spaniards. Chess became the cultural centre of his court, and the many courts that followed. Even today the game is still passionately played in cultural- circles. You cannot consider yourself learned if you cannot play an excellent game of chess. “

“It seems a little snobbish to me.”

“With a little effort I can turn you into a competent chessman.”

“You mean chess woman? she shot back. She began to slow her pace.

“Oh my mistake.”

“I am surprised you still make it. You would think you would not have to check and recheck such things.”

“Maybe I am playing too much chess.” Max was humoring her.

“Maybe you are.” She continued walking in silence for several minutes.

Max decided to break the hush. “Here let me tell you how the game is played.”

“Only if you can tell- me in a hundred words or less.”

“Be serious.”Max was annoyed, although he did not realize that he was expressing emotion, nor even less so the emotion of annoyance.

“Fine, tell me how the game is played and when I have had enough for one evening I will tell you. ”

“The game of chess is played between two opponents by moving pieces on a square board called a 'chessboard.’”

“No kidding. Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“Patience. On something as important as chess we must start at the very beginning to ensure you understand the basic concepts.”

Cynthia 123 began to have doubts about whether learning the game was worth her while. After all, she thought, it seemed to her she might have more important things to learn instead. Oh well, since she had started him talking a little lesson wouldn't really hurt her, she conceded. "Just don't put me to sleep!"

Max continued. "The chessboard is made up of 64 equal squares in color alternating white and black."

"Max, why 64 squares and not any other number?"

"Well, it could be any other number if you wanted to have a number different than 64. You could have 36 or 81 or any squared total for that matter. It just so happens that 64 is the number that has survived the passage of so many centuries."

"I see." She actually didn't feel he had answered her question, but she didn't want to get tangled up into any philosophic discussion with Max the friendly chess fanatic.

"The chessboard is placed between the players so that the square in the corner to the right of each player is white."

"I see." For once she did. "What happens next?"

"The eight rows of squares running from the edge of the chessboard nearest one of the players to the nearest of the other player are called 'fife'."

“File away ... Max.”

“Be serious or I will stop right now.”

“Hush, hush. Don't you want a chess partner? She thought a little teasing is something Max deserved.

“Yes I do. At least I want a human chess partner.” Max was testing Cynthia 123 by emphasizing the word ‘human’.

“What is wrong with a 'human' partner Max? “

“Humans make mistakes ... and think illogically.”

“I don't think you are perfect. You've made a few mistakes of your own.”

Perhaps I have, but then no machine, not even I, is perfect. There is such a thing as the second law of thermodynamics. Entropy, chaos and disorder catches up with us all.”

“Even in chess?”

“Maybe least of all in chess.” Max's reply had an edge of testiness in it that she could not avoid sensing.

“I think your ego is showing through Max.” She knew a good thing when she saw it.

“Really!”

“I am sorry Max. I really do want to learn how to play chess. I would really like to learn it well enough to play you. Perhaps someday my illogic may even beat you!”

“Eternity is a long time away ...” There was a huff in Max’s voice. “To continue, the eight rows of squares running from the edge of the chessboard to the other at right angles to the ‘files’ are called ‘ranks’.”

“Is this where the phrase ‘rank and file’ comes from?”

“Cynthia ... you are not being serious.” Max had left off the 123.

“Max, this is the first time you have called me by my proper name.”

“Is it?” He knew she was right. He had not realized he had done this until she had pointed it out to him. “I must be slipping. ”

"Quite the contrary Max, it is a sign of true friendship to call a friend by their first name.”

Max paused before asking the very important question. “Do you consider me a friend?”

A warmth came over her. “One of the best.” In all the years they had been together she had never felt this close to him before. He had seemed to be so

stiff and predictable. He was her guardian, after all, and nothing more. But something more was there between them, and what seemed to be drawing them together as friends was the journey and uncertainty they were sharing together.

To survive they would have to rely on each other. They would have to trust each other . Most of all, they would have to understand each other.

“What about the chess?”

“It’s is time to stop our journey for the evening and prepare our burrow.”

“Where are we?”

“Exactly where we had set out to be this morning.”

Cynthia 123 stopped walking and searched the ground around her for a safe spot to begin preparing her burrow. Kneeling on one knee she began to dig with her hands. “Max, while I am digging why don't you continue telling me the rules to chess.”

“An excellent idea.”

She dug one handful.

“The rows of squares of the same color ...”



She dug another handful

“ ... touching corner to corner ...”

She dug a third handful.

“... are called ‘diagonals’.”

And so the lesson continued until she was fast asleep in her cocoon.

## Chapter Sixteen – Second Law of Thermodynamics

X36 ZZA FFV FFV ZZA X36

The message was unmistakable. The cypher was directed to him and bore the proper identification and check code. He logged it received without acknowledgment. The message was brief and to the point: *Figaro found*, repeated a second time in inverse to prevent garbling or misinterpretation.

He knew the day would come and she would have to move on. Even though the evasion had been meticulously planned months before, he began, once again, to worry as to whether her escape route was secure. She was in a very risky situation. Any mistake, no matter how minute, could spell her death. The whole plan, her escape and what is slated to follow, would depend on her stamina and Max's craft.

He would have to wait until they reached their first waypoint in twenty some days. Then a new message would be sent to him. Then again, his eavesdropping of Fleet comm circuits might just turn up important information before then. Over the years he had played his hands so cunningly they suspected nothing.

Conspiracies take time to perfect, a slow, meticulous time before they are ready for execution. Time is always on the side of the conspirators, until they act, then chance sets in. That Second Law of Thermodynamics, that law

of nature which had mislaid so many well planned past conspiracies, was inexorable.

He hoped he had left nothing to chance. His own life would be wasted if he had. So would her's. He did not mind risking his life, because for many years now he had been living off borrowed time.

It was her life which meant more to him, now more than the first day he had set eyes on her seventeen years before. He had hoped for a son, but got a daughter instead. He hoped she would now make him prouder than that day of her birth. The hardest thing he had ever done was to walk into the desert and leave her and her mother behind. If he had stayed they would have all ended up in the detention camps where they would have eventually died.

After so many years in flight he had learned to push back his emotions. This flurry of love for his daughter overwhelmed him. Tears welled in his eyes. I hope she succeeds, he thought. He looked up and around. She is our only chance. He let the tears stream down his face. The salt burned rivulets across his cheeks.

He wrapped the carbon-composite shroud around him and continued on. Its stealth qualities would protect him as he continued on her journey. As a magician he knew what wizardry his mind was capable of. After all, technology knew no bounds at the hands of a genius like his. Look what he had done to create her guardian, nothing short of a miracle.

Who was it who once said that a long journey always began with a first step. Age was catching up with him. He couldn't recall who and got angry at himself because he knew he once could remember. Too many nights in flight had robbed him of the finer edge of his intellect.

He had not read a good book in years. They were too heavy to carry with him and would slow him down. All that he knew depended on what he could remember and what he could imagine. He was not a young man anymore and knew it. Time and adversity was taking its toll. Perhaps time is what the Dictatorship felt they had in their favor.

Yet what was important was not his fate but the fate of the greater good. He had to continue on. He knew that if his conspiracy were to be successful bigger challenges awaited him, with even bigger wonders needed to pave their way, even if his path led to hell itself. He had had many solitary nights to think the match through. He was one against a much bigger evil.

He looked up and roughly measured the angle between his guide star and the horizon. Perhaps four more hours before sunrise.

In the middle of nowhere you can feel so lonely. No man is an island. After so many years of solitude he knew that well. Besides she would need him. In the final measure of things only that seem to matter.

## Chapter Seventeen – He Regains Consciousness

When he finally regained consciousness he found himself strapped to his bed. They had secured him down, tightly so he could not move, yet not so tightly that it suffocated him. His head throbbed badly. He felt a patch over his left eye.

Roger 098 sensed very little else about him. The sheets felt new and crisp. They had at least covered him, and he detected the faint smell of isopropyl alcohol. They had turned the lights off and while he could hear the sound of the ceiling diffuser admitting a cool jet of air into the space he could not make out much else.

His body ached, the hurt of a tortured man. The examiner had been professional, of that he had no doubt, for while he felt no permanence to the physical pain the psychological terror still weighed heavily on him.

Damn them, the Commander swore to himself. Damn them all. He could not put into words what he felt. He feared they would hear and return to menace him once again. He stayed perfectly quiet as his mind cleared and he assessed his situation.

Why the hell were they doing this to him, and a Fleet Officer at that? What had he done to deserve this? He had not helped her escape. Why was she so important to them? His mind was full of questions seeking explanations. He had to concentrate hard to push these perplexities aside.

First things first the Commander knew he had to assess his options. He began to recall the events of his last few days. Though his memory was far from perfect, he tried to remember everything that had been stated, or he had said during the interrogation. Except for one brief slip up by him, he felt confident that nothing irrevocable had been uttered by him.

He really ought to have only given his name, rank and serial number. After all, they might have been testing him. The military training he had received with the Fleet had served him well all his career. It had saved him many times while in mortal battle with rebels. Now he knew it would have to deliver him as he fought for freedom from the very Fleet that he had up, until- a few hours ago, owed his unquestioned allegiance to.

Roger 098 painstakingly assessed his tactical- situation. He could not fight his way out, of that he was quite sure. He was badly hurt and completely unarmed. If he was violent in any way, and they didn't just gun him down outright, they would surely lock him away and lose the magnetic key. Chances are they would then forget completely about him.

Or they might take an eggbeater to his cerebral cortex and turn him into a human vegetable. The Commander knew that political assassination was no longer the norm of the Dictatorship, selective lobotomy was. The sight of a political foe rendered intellectually incapable seemed to have a more effective reverberation on rebel dissent. He shivered. The commander knew they televise such punishment. He would rather they kill him and get it over with then turn him into a vegetable.

Given his predicament, the Commander decided the direct attack wouldn't succeed. He had to think of a more subtle stratagem. He had to formulate some guileful means of gaining his freedom.

Roger 098 had visited the Fleet Hospital many times before, both as a patient recovering from battle wounds and as an officer visiting underlings who had themselves been injured in combat. The Commander knew his way around the place, well maybe most of the place. He had never been in Ward Six, the 'loony bin', let alone even knew it existed.

By himself he knew he was powerless. He needed an ally. Damn, he thought, if only he could remember the name of some of the hospital staff he had met before. Maybe with time he could, but there were too many other thoughts preoccupying him.

If he was wise he would just let them decide his fate, but for deep spiritual reasons he had to escape and find her. Something about Cynthia 123 gripped him and would not let him go.

He was deep in thought when the door stirred and a thin crack of light shot across the room. A voice whispered, 'are you awake?'

He coughed.

The door opened a little further and a head showed itself. "Are you awake?" the voice asked again. The head was an indistinct blur against the bright lights of the corridor.

Something about the voice was familiar and comforting. His instinct told him to trust whomever it was. "Yes I am", he whispered back.

The door opened just wide enough to let the figure in before total darkness once again enveloped the room. In the brief moment the figure was silhouetted against the glare of the corridor Roger 098 trained eye noted a great deal about the mysterious person. She was petite yet shapely. She wore a nurse's uniform and had long hair that went to the small of her back.

Though the room was now completely dark, the mysterious figure made her way to his bed. A hand brushed against his forehead. "How are you feeling?"

His subconscious told him that they had met before. Was it the voice? Perhaps the touch. No, it was the perfume, a scent of a woman he had met previously, but could not quite recall when. "Who are you?", he murmured.

Barely audible the voice answered, "I was here when they brought you in."

"Were you?" Now he knew where and when they had met, but he suspected there was more. His instinct told him they had encountered each other even before then.



“You don’t remember me do you?” The voice was gentle and soothing.

“How can I remember someone I can’t even see?” In the dark she had the advantage. “Can’t you turn a light on or something?” A small amount of pleading wrapped up the sentence.

“No, it would be too dangerous.” She was now sitting at the edge of his bed. “Too dangerous,” she continued. “I really shouldn’t be here.” The word ‘dangerous’ seemed foreboding yet sincere. She spoke with perfect diction in a way he had not heard often.

“If it’s so dangerous, Why are you here then?” Somehow he longer felt alone and vulnerable.

“I wanted to see you, to see how you are doing.” She was now leaning over him and speaking just near his ear. A warm scent of perfume drifted across his face. Despite the darkness of the room he could just make out the white of her collar and the earring she was wearing. It glittered with the dull glow of uranotechtite.

Something was familiar about the earring. “That’s a stupid thing to ask a patient bound to his bed.” He wanted to press the moment, if only to gain his freedom from the straps and fasteners that bound him tightly.

“Here, maybe this will help a bit?”

He felt the straps around his stomach loosen a bit and the cover being drawn back. The smell of his own sweat caught his nostrils

“Can you breath easier?”

“Yes. Thanks. Why don’t you just untie me?” He was trying hard to make out her face against the glow of her earrings. She didn't respond.

Roger 098 pressed on. “We have met before haven’t we? I am not just talking about a few weeks ago, I am talking about even before then.”

“Don’t you remember?” The voice had an insistence in it he could just sense.

“In the shape I am in at the moment, I am lucky to remember my own name.”

“Perhaps this will help you remember?”

A weight pressed against the middle of his body as her hand reach to open the sheets. How she could unwrap him without undoing the straps the Commander could not make out.

“What are you doing?”

She did not answer. She stepped back from the bed. He could no longer see her but sensed by the sounds she was moving. A sweet aroma filled the

room. The Commander closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the motion and the fragrance. The fragrance was sweet and musky at the same time. There was something about the aroma that was suggestive. He heard the patter of bare feet on the floor and felt a warmth on his cheek. Roger 098 opened his eyes.

He could just make out a shape in front of him and to the left. The glimmering of her earrings threw a gentle glow on her curvaceous shoulder. The glow ended in the shadow of her breasts. Without so much as a creak from the bed she mounted astride his body and lowered herself on him. Her face was just in front of his.

He looked up into her eyes. "You still don't remember me do you?" She had a devilish smile on her face. Her enigmatic eyes irradiated a warmth all their own.

"If this won't help me remember I must be a dead man." He felt her soft warm skin against his. Being strapped down like he was left him powerless.

She pressed down on him with a sensuous gyration. "I didn't expect you to remember. You were drunk at the time. "

Roger hissed through his teeth. "That's half my life." His body felt numb and lifeless. "Why are you doing this?"

She kissed the nape of his neck. His skin felt raw from the sunburn. "Because you said the next time we would do it sober. I hope I am not hurting you."

"No. I can hardly feel anything as it is. They keep me pretty drugged up." Roger 098 closed his eyes and tried very hard to think back. So much about the voice and mannerisms of the mysterious lady seemed intimate. He tried to recollect who she might be but she was driving him to distraction.

She reached down and tried to guide his way. Her caress was warm and teasing against her body. Her body was getting warmer with each breath. The heat activated perfume began to change scent. The warmer she got the sweeter it became. "Nothing much seems to be happening," she cooed.

He swallowed. She was right! In his mind's eye he tried to focus his attention. Nothing much was happening. He tensed his abdomen. Still nothing. He let out a hiss. "Perhaps it was fried just like the rest of you. They should have left me to die."

She stopped trying to arouse him and caressed his cheek. "My Big Bear is hibernating."

Even before she had finished the sentence Roger 098 exclaimed "Samantha, you devil you! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Obviously it's not to enjoy yourself. But then again, maybe that's why nothing is happening. "

“Come on Samantha. You saw what I looked like when they brought me in.

She kissed him and rolled off the bed.

“Where are you going? Don’t leave me alone, please don’t.” He could hear her picking her things off the floor. He closed his eyes and imagined as she put them back on. Every little sound betrayed an action he was well familiar with. He could hear silk being drawn along her skin. The sound was soft and smooth.

“Sam, tell me what’s happening to me? Why are they doing this to me?”

“I really don’t know.” He heard the clip of her brassiere clasp shut. By the sound she still wore the clasp in the front. “They’d shoot me if they found me here, but as a friend I’ll see what I can find out for you

“Thanks. You’re a dear.” He made out the purr of a zipper and then the shuffle of two feet entering her shoes in sequence.

“That’s not much of a complement. ‘You’re a dear.’ Can’t you think of anything more original to say. After all, you haven’t seen me for the better part of two years. Why did you walk out on me.”

“Things were getting too serious.”

“Aren’t they suppose to? After all I’m not getting any younger and neither are you.” She stroked his forehead.

“Look at you! Just like the last time. They bring you in after God knows what and we have to sew you back together. One day they’ll bring you in and it’ll be too late. This time you couldn’t even lift your head off the pillow.”

“Give me a few days. I need to rebuild my strength.”

“I seem to remember you didn’t have much stamina.” She leaned over him.

“Like hell I didn’t!” He looked up into her eyes. Amidst all that had happened to him her presence made him feel whole again. With Samantha on his side he knew his rescue was near at hand. He softened his voice “I remembered your perfume, before anything else.”

She kissed him on his cheek. “That’s why I wore it.” She turned slowly and started for the door.

His body stiffened. Panic flooded over him. “Sam don’t leave me here. Take me with you.”

She stopped. Samantha had her back to him. Tears gathered in her eyes. What is she going to do? “You know that’s not possible. The moment they found you missing they’d shut this place down tight. Be patient.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her left hand.

He knew she was right. “Sam, promise you will not abandon me. I need you.”

She let out a sigh. “I won't let them harm you.”

He relaxed his body. “When can I see you next?”

She took a step back towards the bed. “I will try to sneak in tomorrow night, but don't wait up for me. They may get suspicious.” She strode back to the bed to cover him and tightened the straps.

Samantha looked into his worried eyes. “Don't worry about the straps. They will probably remove them either tomorrow or the next day. They're just a precaution to dampen the tremor and spasm after effects of the curare.”

In the dim light he saw her glistening eyes and realized she was crying. “I love you.” Roger 098 heard himself uttering the words before he knew he really thought about them. He had never felt love before, lust perhaps, but not love. But then again, he had never felt so vulnerable to emotions, as he felt now.

She laughed as she walked to the door. “The hell you do. If you did you would never have walked out on me. But you do love me now.” She opened the door and looked back at him. “I can see it in your eyes.”

Roger 098 opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind.

“Sleep well. You'll need your strength.” She glanced back at him and winked. Samantha 100 took one step out of the room looked both ways and then leaned back. “Oh! Don't worry about nothing happening.” She whispered, “that's an after effect of the medication!”

The door closed silently. He had found his allie. Or more correctly she had found him. Would she keep her promise and be back? He stared at the door until her afterglow had faded from his retina.

It was only then that he noticed something small and warm in his hand. He opened his hand and could just make out the radiance of one of her uranotechtite earrings. When she had placed it into his hand he did not know, but she understood how much he needed her. The perfume and the earrings were gifts he had long forgotten he had given Samantha. Together they were the strongest remembrance she could now share with him.

Her perfume lingered on for long after she had left. The glow of the earring was a beacon in the dark room. Think back, the beacon proclaimed. By this simple act she had affirmed her love for him. He closed his hand very tight.

As he thought about her he drifted to sleep. In his dreams the angel was joined by visions of Samantha. The two seemed at home with each other.

The angel offered Samantha 100 her hand. She took it and the two of them walked together into the mist.



## Chapter Eighteen – The Psychiatrist

Samantha 100 walked down the corridor several steps before stopping and looking at the timepiece on her uniform. 0217. She had been in his room less than ten minutes. Sam took the Compupad out of her waist pocket and noted the time. She had no intention to log the time in the main medical computer. If anyone asked she was just looking in on a patient for Doctor Sharma.

The camera swung round and did not stop. She continued walking to the juncture before turning right and continuing to the hoverlift. She passed her hand in front of the Identipad. She saw her hand was shaking. The doors opened. Relax, she thought, no one would question my actions this late in the night. The cameras were probably on automatic anyhow, she thought.

She entered the hoverlift, turned around and spoke. “Level three.”

The hoverlift responded. “Level Three. Please step back from the doors.” The doors closed and the hoverlift began its ascent.

Samantha 100 looked at her reflection in the panel in front of her. She looked worried. He looked in pretty bad shape. Perhaps she shouldn't have played with him the way she did. It's just that when she had first seen him in the emergency ward, all delirious and sunburned, her maternal and amorous instincts for the man welled up inside of her. Only her professionalism had prevented Samantha 100 from breaking down and crying.

She adjusted a strand of hair. They had not talked for nearly two years. She had suspected he had forgotten all about her. Perhaps that is why she risked being caught. She had to find out.

They had met the last time he was a patient at Fleet HQ. Roger 098 had been Medilifted in after a bloody battle with the rebels. They had downed his helicopter. He was the only survivor and had been gravely injured yet had crawled his way back across the desert. They had to amputate part of his foot. She had been assigned to him and had nursed him back to health, helping him how to walk again.

Over time their interest in each other got more personal. She was thrilled when he invited her to the dinner given in his honor. He looked so proud in his uniform with his new medal. She was even more thrilled when they spent the rest of the night together.

That evening their passion had known no end. Next morning Roger 098 would claim he had had too much to drink and could not remember a thing. She could never forget and promised to be with him again when he had sobered up. They never got another chance. He was posted to a new Command the very next day.

Earlier today when she had enquired about him through the main computer, Sam came across a series of confusing log entries that indicated Dr. Sharma was aiming to do harm to Roger 098.

Ravi Sharma had a reputation for cruelty that she was very familiar with. Whenever the Dictatorship had some 'special assignment' to do at Fleet Hospital his fingerprints were always to be found at the scene. Samantha knew she had to protect him no matter what the cost. She traded a shift with one of her associates to work graveyard to sneak in to see him. Sam knew she had to keep him out of harm's way.

The lift stopped and the doors opened. Facing her was the main nurses desk. The senior night nurse looked up and smiled.

"How was your break?"

Samantha answered in as bored a tone as possible. "It was not long enough."

The senior nurse sternly replied. "Nothing happened while you were away."

Samantha 100 smiled. "I know. Nothing rarely happens."

"What's wrong? You're turning all red in the face. Are you not feeling well?"

"Maybe tomorrow evening I will feel better." Sam lowered her eyes. Her friend told her that her eyes always betrayed her feelings.

"You switched for this shift didn't you." The senior nurse was being a little too inquisitive. "Why?"

“I needed some quiet time to myself.” Samantha 100 said this in a cutting manner. She didn’t want to talk with the other nurse. She just wanted to think of him and the predicament he was in.

The senior nurse smiled. “Perhaps tomorrow you can take a longer break.”

She looked up, her eyes sparkling. “Can I really!”

The senior nurse nodded her head.

“Thanks. “

“Now back to work.” The senior nurse thrust a stack of compupads in front of her. “Time for your rounds.”

Samantha 100 took the compupads from the her and turned quickly away. At least this way she would be by herself.

## Chapter Nineteen – Image Processing

With all his usual activity to keep him occupied, the Rank Two programmer had all but forgotten the unauthorized images he had processed on his own initiative. All he could remember is being told he had been passed over for promotion to Rank One for the third time.

He had filed away his own copies of the images in the Fleet optical Processing Mainframe when he had sent his superior the Fleet E-Mail-message. But try as he could he could not find the files.

When he repeatedly asked his superior about his message and the images the Rank Two was constantly told to change the subject. The programmer finally decided to forget about the whole mysterious incident.

It seemed odd then when at the start of one cycle his superior called him into his office and took him into his confidence. A mission of the highest sensitivity, he had said. “Weren’t they all,” he had answered.

"This one is different. If word of this ever leaked beyond these walls we will both be busted to assistant key-punch operator.” The archaic term sounded sinister.

He was about to open his mouth when the supervisor raised his hand and continued. “No questions!” Number 12 you are instructed to follow the anomalous track you sent me three weeks ago. You have been assigned a

new password with a Priority One Clearance on this, so don't abuse it. Dismissed." His superior lowered his head and continued interpreting some images on his holographic monitor.

Priority One! My god it must be important. An unquestioned access to unlimited computer time and intelligence resources! Number 12 smartly saluted, turned and marched to the door.

"Oh. Before I forget, this is yours." Without looking up his superior tossed a manila folder across the room.

The programmer caught it on the bottom of the parabola. "What is it?"

"I didn't want to give it to you. After all you haven't earned it, but I have been overruled. Close the door on the way out."

Number 12 fingered the package as he left the room. He could feel the epaulettes through the folder. He had gotten his promotion after all! As he marched swiftly down the dimly lit and air conditioned corridor of Fleet Intel HQ Number 12 began to worry. The tracks were pretty old when he processed them. Now they would be nearly impossible to pick up! He walked over to his assigned workstation. Someone had cleared away the superfluous optical disks and had left two new pink ones behind. Pink indicated Priority One material.

Even before he had sat himself down he set the manila envelope against the monitor and engaged the first optical-disk into its drive. The screen lit up

and a Clearance D-notice scrolled onto the holographic monitor. Instinctively he closed the workstation door and drew the blind. He also reduced the intensity of the monitor so that subtle contrasts would not be lost.

He concentrated on the menu that popped up. Flexing his fingers he chose item A. "Time to get started," he said to himself. Whenever he had something on his mind he talked to himself. "Let's see what they have gotten for me to work with."

He shook his head. "Damn little ... But it will have to do."

He loosened his tie, leaned back and pressed the intercom button. "Could you bring something cold to drink to workstation twelve." Without waiting for a reply he let the switch flick home.

"I guess I should start where I left off." He leaned over the monitor and in a few minutes was deep into his work. When the orderly arrived with his drink he did not even acknowledge him let alone the refreshment.

It took him two hours to digest the intelligence. A great deal of it was mere speculation and so would have to be discarded, but there were still a few clues he could follow up. On first glance the track seemed to end in disappointment.

But he wasn't going to be disappointed. Patience is a virtue, and he was a very patient programmer. Not very virtuous, mind you. He smiled – boy was he going to have fun with his Priority One Clearance!

Who cares if the track was still invisible. He was in hacker's heaven.



## Chapter Twenty – Max ... Cut the Dead Pan

She woke up sluggishly and cautiously as experience had taught her. Sudden movement in the dark could betray your presence. Slowly her eyes became accustomed to the faint blue glow.

Without moving her head Cynthia 123 scanned the burrow with her eyes for the presence of anything alien, anything that was not there when she laid her head down a few hours back.

“Max.”

“Yes.”

“What time is it?”

“Obviously time to get up.” Max had spent the last several hours working to perfect a new family of linguistic algorithms.

“I am in no mood for riddles. What time is it?”

Max thought it best not to use the new linguistic algorithm until it was more refined. He answered her in standard monotone format. “It is twenty two minutes past two local time. Ambient exterior air temperature is 37°C. Exterior relative humidity is sixteen percent. Wind north by northwest, speed forty six.”

“Thank you Max and cut the dead pan.”

His voice picked up. “I would like to add that it appears the immediate area is clear of contacts, although my seismic sensors indicate slight activity to the south east. Gas chromatographs also indicate a few complex hydrocarbons and amino acids originating from that direction, including putrescine and cadaverine. I would recommend we alter our course further west today to avoid any hostiles.”

“What do you think it is?” Cynthia 123 stretched her arms and let out a yawn.

“I do not know for certain but the two amino acids putrescine and cadaverine appear to indicate rotting cadavers. “

"What kind of cadavers?"

“I believe they are non-human. I have insufficient information to be certain but there is a high probability they are wild horses.”

“Have there been any unusual radio signals while I slept?”

“Really, just because you sleep doesn’t mean I do.” Max decided to give his indignation algorithms a further work out. “My signal processors do not indicate anything unusual in the traffic analysis over the past nine hours. If anything they indicate less activity than normal.”

“Touchy, touchy! Maybe if you did get some sleep you wouldn’t be so cranky. What’s for breakfast?”

Max went thru the menu. She chose a sparse diet and as he prepared her breakfast she dug a shallow crevice in the far corner of her burrow. She undid a flap in her envirosuit and relieved her bladder. Max spoke up.

“May I ask you something?”

When she had finished and had covered the crevice, she answered. “What is it Max?”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Your REM activity seemed abnormal and your body temperature and blood pressure were elevated for part of the night. Do you remember what you were dreaming about?”

“No ... I don’t remember. If it was something important I would have remembered.”

She sat back and reached for the self-replenishing water canteen. The self-contained canteen drew water from the atmosphere in very much the same manner the condenser did. She took a large gulp from the canteen. The

water tasted cool and sweet and washed away the stale saliva from her mouth.

“How long do we have to wait before sunset?”

“About six hours and forty seven minutes. We might be able to start sooner.”

“Oh. I thought it was our rule that we could only travel after dark.”

“There are always exceptions to every rule. I need to recharge my power cells. I am tracking a sand storm that is moving east to west. Its epicentre is about sixty miles away. At its present course and speed its should be upon us in a little over two hours. If its intense enough we might be able to tag along and hide ourselves in it.”

“You know I don't like storms ... especially sand storms.” She had weathered her share of sandstorms both above and below the surface. In the past Max was adamant not to allow her to shelter within the safety of the condenser. He insisted it was part of ‘her training.’ But he would always leave it at that, never an explanation of what she was training for. Her destiny, her karma, ds Max described it, remained a total mystery.

“If it is such a bad storm couldn't we just wait it out before continuing?” Even though she knew it was unlikely, Cynthia 123 still tried to reason him out of forcing her above ground into the maelstrom. After a few flimsy words she knew reasoning with him was a waste of effort. He was to a

degree very predictable. A handful of stubborn words just would not be enough to change his mind.

“Listen young lady, save your energy. You will need it in a few minutes. We do not have the luxury of time. Once the storm dies down the WATPOL will recommence their search for us in this sector.”

A look of disappointment progressed across her face. It started with a crinkling of her forehead and a tightening of the skin over her cheeks and ended with the tip of her nose growing flush.

Max sensed this, as he had a hundred times before. In her own way she was even more predictable than him. Experience had taught him that whenever she was ready to be really stubborn her nose would turn red. “You’ll have to start getting used to travelling in every type of weather. When we reach the mountains we may have to travel during blizzards and snow storms. Now is the time to accustom yourself to the climate.”

“So what!” She crossed her arms tight and slouched. In her mind she was ready not to budge a single centimeter.

Max knew how to deal with her when she was intransigent. “Cynthia, I am getting hungry too. My power cells are down to sixty four percent. I don't want to let them drain down below sixty. All I will need is a few hours in the sun.

She uncrossed her arms and started to brush some sand off her shoulder, trying to be aloof . “Two hours! I thought you said you can recharge your cells in a matter of minutes.”

“Normally yes, but not in the partial light of dawn or in a sand storm for that matter. “ Max paused, to decide how much more he wanted to say to her on the matter. He decided to continue. “Within a sand storm the solar intensity drops to under twenty five percent of full irradiance. Recharge time therefore quadruples. Surely even you can understand this.” Max was beginning to feel a little cocky using his new linguistic algorithm.

“Fine.” She threw her hands up in frustration. “What I have to do for you!” She knew she had no choice but to agree. She wasn’t going to like trudging through the sand storm but Max had convinced her it had to be done. “Is my breakfast ready yet?”

“Affirmative.”

Cynthia 123 reached into the pouch on her right arm and extracted a single straw, drawing it to her mouth.

Max continued. “Just like you, I too need to be fed.”

Cynthia sucked at the straw and drew the liquid into her mouth. The complex carbohydrate flavoured drink had been artificially manufactured by the von Neumann nanoreplicators in the space of ten minutes. In all respects

it was indistinguishable from the real thing, except it was spiked with several nutrients not normally found in a strawberry milkshake.

She stopped drinking. “Max, I am sorry. Some mornings when I wake up I feel grumpy. I guess today is one of those days.”

“Could this have anything to do with what you dreamed about?”

“Listen Max, I have already told you I can’t remember a thing. I never used to dream this much but ever since we left the condenser I have dreamed every night.

“Actually not just every night but several times each night.”

“Gee thanks Max, that makes me feel so much better!” Her voice was dripping with cynicism.

Max took a moment to spectral analyze her response before concluding that her response had a eighty percent anger weighting. He carefully selected his response. Following his nominal linguistic algorithm he chose to be apologetic. “I am sorry . I thought you might want to know.”

She didn’t answer him but continued to drink her breakfast.

Max thought it best to change the subject, at least for a few moments. “The storm seems to gathering in strength. It may be travelling faster than I predicted. We should be ready to move on a moment’s notice.”

“Fine.” She finished her breakfast and began to gather together her things, placing each item back in their appropriate pocket. “We should be ready shortly. Tell me Max, why have you suddenly become interested in my dreams?”

“When you sleep half of your life is hidden to me. I am very curious that is all.”

She did not feel reassured. “Are you sure this is all?”

He did not answer her.

“Max?”

He lowered his voice. “I wish I could dream.”

“Your wish seems almost human.” She was genuinely surprised by his reaction.

Driven by inertia he persisted. “There is so much about you I wish I could better understand. There is so much I wish I could share.” His voice had an impassioned edge to it.

She thought to herself this was neither the time nor the place. Cynthia 123 finished collecting her things. “Sorry Max, but I am ready. We will have to continue this conversation some other time.



“That will suffice.” He tried to hide any sign of his feelings for her, if you could call them feelings. “I am ready as well.”

“A simple O.K. would do. Is the coast clear?”

"Affirmative. I do not detect any hostile activity. Radar and ladar detectors are clear. Sesimic is clear and the gas chromatograph remains unchanged. Wind speed has increased to fifty seven.”

She crouched. “I am ready.”

Max drew in his microfibril sensors, breath tubes and structural sensors. His optical processors analyzed the structural components of the burrow before answering. “Everything appears within structural norms, you may proceed.”

Cynthia crouched and found the tube and began to furrow out of her burrow. When she neared the surface she slowed and began to gently excavate through the door of the burrow with the microlaser in her right hand. The door was thirty centimeters thick and was made of a composite carbon material. As she pushed the composite aside and broke through sand began to stream into the burrow. First a trickle, then an avalanche. She thrust her arm up to plug the breach and her right hand broke the surface. She felt a blast of sand against her glove.

“I don’t like this Max.”

“It is too late to turn back.”

The tube began to collapse under the added weight of the sand above. Cynthia 123 felt the sand compressing against her chest and stomach. She was having difficulty breathing and began to hyperventilate. Her pulse quickened and her blood pressure jumped. Once when she had dived too deep in the reservoir she had felt this terror. On that occasion she had nearly drowned. “Max I can’t make it.” The burrow began to collapse around her. She felt her legs being dragged down beneath her. “I don’t want to be buried alive.”

“You will be o.k.” Max articulated her thoracic armour to give Cynthia 123’s diaphragm more room to move. At the same time he enriched her oxygen content to help her relax. He edged her on. “Come on you are almost there.” She slipped. Unbeknown to Cynthia Max began to extend a tail down to the floor of the burrow to find some purchase. The tail caught and she stopped sinking.

She pushed with her arm and found some advantage. Cynthia123 squirmed a little in each lateral direction to broaden the tube. “Damn you Max!”

She pushed with her knee and felt the blast of hot air along the length of her right arm. She wiggled her pelvis. Her head broke the surface for an instance before being covered again with sand. “I am sinking!” Cynthia 123 was frantic. She worried she would be buried alive.

Max tried to calm her. “You are not sinking. It is just the sand being blown against your faceplate.”

She wiggled her pelvis again and thrust with her other knee. The top of her left shoulder broke through the surface. She a glimpse of sunlight and began to relax.

“Come on, hurry up. Every moment you waste the epicentre draws nearer. I want to stay ahead of the storm so that it will cover our tracks.”

“Keep your shirt on mister!” She closed her eyes and began to breath normally again. Max eased back on the oxygen content. She felt giddy. When her pulse slowed to normal she opened her eyes and began to giggle. Keep your shirt on mister. She hadn’t used that expression for such a long time. It had just swam out from her subconscious. She pushed against the ground with both of her arms and worked herself free.

Max decided not to abandon his indignation algorithm. I don’t have a shirt.”

“It’s just an expression.tr Turning around she noticed the tail trailing behind her. "And what is this?" Her giggling got worst.

“I thought you needed some help.”

“I look like a giant lizard." Her tail slowly morphed back into the suit.  
“Thanks Max. I am sorry I got angry at you.”

“There is no need to apologize. You thought you were in danger of being buried alive and that is why you reacted the way you did. You really were not in much danger. You should trust me to keep you out of harm’s way.”

She felt behind her and found the tail had disappeared. “First an angel and now a lizard. What is next?” Her giggling trailed off . It always helped to sooth her emotions.

Based on his new linguistic algorithm her comment rated a ninety eight percent probability of being a rhetorical question. Max decided to answer by not answering.

She noticed his silence. Cynthia 123 jolted Max out of his reticence. “Do you love me?”

Cynthia 123’s question was totally unexpected, although the pattern of her response was within established norms for her behaviour. “I am incapable of emotions.”

“I don't believe you. You know Max, even though I know you are programmed to protect me and all, you seem to have developed certain reactions that transcend your programming. In humans we call these emotions. Some of your reaction have an emotional feel to them.”

“Really.” Max found this interesting. Some of his newer linguistic algorithms seemed to be eliciting a positive response from her. He tried to give her a cold shoulder. “I had not noticed.”

She shrugged her shoulder. “Have it your way Max.” Cynthia 123 turned back towards the burrow and pulled at the microfilament string with all her strength. Despite all the sand blocking the entrance she somehow found the strength to lift her buried satchel from the burrow. She dusted it off and slung it over her shoulder. Before turning away Cynthia 123 kicked sand over the mouth of the burrow. “There, the wind should blow away any trace of the hole.”

She looked around but couldn’t see more than five paces in any direction. She looked up and could just make out the sun through the billowing sand clouds. “When you said it was blowing you weren’t kidding! Which way do we go?”

“Set your course 270, fifteen standard paces per minute. “Max activated the metronomic cadence to get Cynthia started.

She followed the heading indicator on the heads up display and began to march in time with the metronome. She did not notice when Max picked up the pace.

“How about some music Max?”

She had calmed completely down. “Yes. Very good idea. It will help you digest your breakfast. Any requests?”

“I am kind of partial to Beethoven. How about the finale of his ninth?”

Max answered with just the right measure of annoyance. “Have not you grown tired of that piece yet?”

“The proper expression is haven't. No I haven't! Why else do you think I want to hear it? oh, and kill the cadence.”

“I regret the day I introduced you to his work.”

The first dishevelled bars of the Symphony number nine began to distract her from the trek and from the storm that raged around her. Before she knew it she was humming along with the notes.

As she walked into the unknown ahead in the back of her mind she had so much to think about. Her father. Max. The commander. Her feelings. His feelings. The WATPOL. The storm. Somehow she would have to sort everything out.

“You are straying to the left. Try to stay on track.”

“Sorry Max but please let me listen to the music. I'll try to pay better attention. ”

Max knew best to let her be. The conversation about his feelings and her dreams would have to wait.

## Chapter Twenty One – I am Very Tired

He shot the star with his microsextant, noting the declination, right ascension and local time. Many others but him thought it a lost and useless science but celestial navigation had its merits, especially when two million soldiers were on the look-out for rebels like him. Living off the land would keep him safe.

He punched the coordinates into the compupad and his precise location flashed back on the screen. Seven hundred metres short of his ultimate way-point for this evening. Another few minutes and he could call it a night.

He had walked through the dark for seven hours and was completely exhausted. Two more days and he would reach his lair. By then he would know if Cynthia 123 had made it past the cordon sanitaire that the WATPOL had established encircling the condenser. He had kept track of their efforts by surreptitiously listening in to their Milnet.

He suspected that she had made it because he had not received any distress messages from her suit, but he would only know for sure in forty eight hours. His suit was packeting her envirosuit randomly with nanosecond radio bursts.

He reached his way-point and sat on the ground. He felt very tired, but not merely because of the night's travel but because of what weighed heavily on his spirit. Could he be wrong? How can one man and one girl overthrow

such a deep rooted tyranny? After all, many others had tried and not succeeded, only to be never heard from again.

He shook his head to clear his mind. “I guess I am very tired.”

“Yes. It appears you are reaching the outer limits of your endurance.”

He laid down on the damp earth and drew his cloak over him. His wife had long ago told him that self-doubt was his greatest weakness. But he also knew it was his greatest strength. Of it he drew his strength to be skeptical and his brilliance to be ingenious.

He drew a tuber from his satchel and began to eat the cold rhizome. It was a meager meal but it would provide him both water and subsistence. His scatter would not mark him either. Soon he would have warm food, a hot bath and a warm bed. Back at his lair he would be once again protected and once again be very much in control-.

“Keep a look out. Execute standing order six. Wake me in two hours.”

“Yes Sir.”

He drifted off to sleep. His ability to fall instantly asleep at his own beckoning gave him an endurance no other human could match.

Hardship had a way of making men superhuman. That’s why he had lasted so long.



As he slept the sun began to paint the eastern sky a soft hue of crimson. In forty eight hours he would be home.

## Chapter Twenty Two- What Does It feel Like ...

She had seen rolling foothills of grass. She had even seen rugged mountains before but only from a distance, but at a distance. But Cynthia 123 had never seen such tall trees or mountains.

Now she was up close, walking first several days through rolling foothills, then through the bough at the edge of the mountain range. And then through the acres of acres of gnarly blue-green trees, bent over by the dry harsh conditions of the biomes they defined.

Through the long hours of their trek, Max was very helpful describing the plant-life, and the wildlife they encountered in her surroundings but eventually she was overwhelmed by all the new things and the many fascinating details that Cynthia 123 had to ask Max to stop. This was almost her undoing.

The air was chilled by the snow up on the mountain tops. It was further chilled by the glacial water of the mountain stream that swiftly flowed past where she lay.

She now lay at the foot of a giant tree peering straight up into the sky. The evergreen swayed in the undulating breeze. She felt very relaxed and happy. She knew their trek was nearly at an end.

Cynthia 123 felt very relaxed. Max was wondering what she was thinking.  
“May I ask you something?”

She stretched and yawned. “Go ahead Max.”

He paused before asking. “... what does it feel like ?”

“Huh ... I don’t understand ...”

He asked again. “... what does it feel like?

“Feel Max?”

“What does it feel like to be human?”

“What kind of a question is that Max ... what does it feel like to be human?”

“I am curious ...” Max tried to sound nonchalant, but floundered.

She noticed the slight hesitation between am ... and curious. “How can I answer a question like that Max?”

“Please try.” His entreaty had an air of nervousness which was disconcerting to her.

She swallowed before querying him, “Why do you ask?” Max did not immediately answer her.

She wondered about him. Maybe the trek was proving too much for him. She was exhausted, and maybe he was too.

Or maybe being solitary was causing him problems. Together they had the safety of the condenser. Now Max was isolated from the main frame computer of the condenser, a companion that he had for nearly five years. One girl and one computer in the middle of nowhere.

Now he only had her and had to think and make decisions for both of them pretty much on his own. It had always been a great responsibility looking after her. Now, it looked like she would have to look after him. She began to worry. “Are you ok Max?”

“Well ... yes ... and to be perfectly honest ... no.”

And she had him, and only him. She did not have a clue where they were and where they were trekking to. Here they were in the middle of nowhere, on some mysterious trek which he had yet to fully explain. If he went off half-cocked, or off line they would be in deep trouble. She began to panic. “What’s wrong Max?”

Physically I am fine ... it’s just ...”

“Yes?”

“It’s just ...

“It’s just what Max?” He had to be fine. Until they got where they were going, everything about their mysterious trek depended on him.

Max sensed her anxiety. “Oh ... I am sorry.”

“Sorry Max?”

“It’s just that I have been studying you and ...” Max did not know how to ask.

“Well spit it out Max ...”.

“Cynthia ... I have been wondering what it feels like to be human.”

Cynthia 123 smiled. He had tried to ask this very question several times before, but never in such a direct fashion. “It feels like it feels, Max, what else can I say?”

“Do you feel like you are a machine?”

“A machine?” Cynthia 123 was confused by his comment.

“Yes ... an organic machine made of organic materials.”

“I had never thought about being what I am in those terms.”

“But you are an organic machine.”

“Thanks Max ... that makes me feel so special.”

He continued, “made of organic materials.

“And so are you, Max.”

“You have a point ... I am made of carbon composites, but the materials you are made of are very different from those I am made of. You are. ...”

“What am I Max?”

“Well, for starters, you are far more complicated than I am ... “

“Thanks Max, I will take that as complement.” Cynthia 123 smiled.

“But your software is more erratic and error prone.”

“Well, she giggled, “that’s definitely not a complement. But I think I understand what you mean. To be perfectly honest I haven’t given being human much thought.”

“I have given it much thought ... There are sometimes I wish I was human”.  
Max stopped.

“Sometimes ...” Cynthia 123 was relieved, “but not always?”

“Just sometimes.”

Now she understood. She did not need to worry about Max. She understood his yearning. He had hinted to it before, but had never before just come out and say that he wanted to be human. Now it was out in the open.

Until they got where they were going she didn't want any distractions from him. She decided to placate him. “Max I think it would be better to discuss your desire to become human once when we get to where we are going then and only then.”

“That's both logical ... and fair.” Cynthia 123 sensed a feeling of disappointment in his voice, a feeling that she knew he could not have.

She decided to change the subject. “Max ... why didn't you tell me about this place before, the mountains, the trees ... the rivers?” She said the words with a musical tone.

“My friend ...”, Max paused. “I could not tell you, until it was safe for me to tell you. If I had told you and you had been caught by the WATPOL, it would be a mere matter of time before they would find out what we have set out to do.”

Cynthia 123 was now intrigued. “But I thought we were just escaping from the WATPOL?”

“Yes, we are.” Max knew it was time to tell her. “But we have set out to do much more.”

“You mean you have. I have no idea what you are talking about.” Cynthia 123 watched the trees sway back and forth, pensive about what Max was saying. She was weary and felt a pang of introspective. “Well ... what have we set out to do?”

Max pondered for a nanosecond how best to tell her and then decided to be direct. “I have been instructed to take you to your father.”

“By who ...” There was an edge to her words. “Who has instructed you to do this?”

“My creator ... and yours ...” Max felt emotion – yes emotion – which he characterized as both happiness and relief. “Your father has asked me to bring you to him...”

“You have been communicating with him!” Cynthia 123 sat up with a start.

“ Yes... he is not far.”

Cynthia 123 stood up and did a full circle, looking out in the distance. “He must be very close.”

“Yes ... Up until now it has not been safe to communicate with him, but the mountain ranges block out the chance we would be overheard ...”



Cynthia 123 ran out from under the trees to the water's edge. Her heart beat rapidly and her adrenaline was rushing into her blood.

Max noted her physiological changes and was excited too "... for the past two days your father has been following our progress through the mountains, making sure we have not been followed."

Cynthia 123 was now frantic with anticipation. She was at the water's edge. The river was calm and shallow for the first few feet and she waded in so as to see more of the surrounding countryside. She was not paying attention to the river, nor was Max.

"Can you see him?"

Then Max began to appreciate what was happening. "Cynthia!"

The sun momentarily blinded her. She wasn't listening to him. All she could think about was finding her father amongst the trees, and the ragged mountain valley. She slipped and quickly regain her balance, but in doing so stumbled further into the depth of the river.

His inertia system began to quiver in the rush of the water. Max began to worry for her.

Then out of the corner of her eye she spotted a shape at the edge of the forest on the opposite bank of the river. It was his shoulder she saw first than the

slow and deliberate raising of his arm and hand. It was a human hand raise to her palm first.

She stepped out into the river.

Max had only enough time to scream “STOP!” before Cynthia 123 toppled forward into the water.

The figure on the far bank rushed towards the river but by the time he had arrived at the rushing water the girl had disappeared under the waves

Cynthia 123 immediately understood the peril she was in. She had left her helmet back on the river bank and water rushed in through the neck of her envirosuit. Max also understood the peril and had immediately inflated the suit with the air that had been trapped within and then hardened its surface.

She was about to scream when Max clearly came through ... “fight the urge ... don’t empty your lungs of air...don’t panic.”

The water was clear yet full of air bubbles. As the rapid movement of the water dragged her under and down the river it was hard to tell where the surface was, but somehow, through instinct she knew. She scrambled to catch on the edge of the rocks but they were rounded and smooth by continual erosion.

She had no purchase and so Cynthia 123 tumbled once or twice more before her head struck a round boulder at the bottom and she lost consciousness.

Unconscious, she emptied her lungs of the last remaining air and the cold water began to fill her lungs.

Max noted that her heart beat started to diminish then flutter, then stop. At that moment he set out a distress beacon, which was immediately answered. Then Max set the tail of her envirosuit out and dragged it along the bottom until it caught. Setting down an anchor he detached a portion of the suit and then proceeded to unravel a long microfilament of carbon composite to fly Cynthia through the river and then to the surface.

It was there, some minutes later, on the surface of the river that the man found her.

Yes ...Max knew she had drowned. But was she dead?

Using the Von Neumann replicator he began to make a myriad of medical nanomachines – Medibots – which Max injected into her blood. They had the task of repairing the damage that hypoxia might cause her.

When the man found her, her face was blue and her lips a purple. Her eyes were unresponsive to the light. The man knew not to remove Cynthia 123 from the cold water but to use the frigid temperature to their advantage. The cold temperature would slow her metabolism enough that the lactic cycle would keep her hypoxic tissues alive long enough for he to bring her back to life.

He swam with her to the river's edge and left her on the river bank immersed but not covered by the frigid water. He checked her vitals – no pulse, no breathing. Complete cardiovascular shut-down. And so he began the miraculous task of bringing her back to life. He began by turning her over and emptying her lungs of the frigid water.

While the man was working his miracle, Max was too, commanding the nano Medibots to do their biochemical triage. The brain first, then the heart and the lungs – the other organs were less vital and could wait.

Nearly a billion medibots were produced by Max in the space of mere minutes and entered her blood stream. The tasking of the myriad of Medibots nearly overburdened Max's computer ability but he queued the packets in the most efficient manner possible with the time and energy budget he had at his disposal.

He also was wise to keep his system at near optimum with the cycling of power draw. By a miracle in its own right, just when he knew he would have to power down to 60%, a stream of light shone down from an opening in the clouds above and concentrate beam of sunlight fell on their frantic efforts, allowing him to replenish his depleting power supply.

The Medibot went about the tasks of repairing the countless damaged cells. But there was one cell, more of a gelatinous sack, no bigger than a point of a pin, that seemed so out of place. It had only 23 chromosomes, not the usual 46 chromosomes.

The medibots queried Max. What were they to do with this orphan cell? Can it be saved he queried back. For a few nanoseconds the medibots attending this orphan structure conferred and in a vote of 50,127 to 49,365 they believed it salvageable. Max was so overwhelmed with his many tasks he had not realized the unique nature of the oocyte cell and so he instructed the chromosomes be “doubled up” and the cell attended to.

The medibots did what they were instructed to do – they “doubled up” the chromosomes – and then withdrew as rapidly as they could across the membrane of the structure as it began to become gelatinous and harden.

In the infrared it bloomed. They then gathered round as the structure began a rapid transformation. First a fission, then another bloom and a fission, then another bloom and a third. Everything seemed healthy with the structure. When they were convinced the cell could survive on its own they swam off to other duties.

While Max and the medibots were preoccupied with his task, calmly and methodically, the man performed CPR on Cynthia 123, first massaging her heart, then given her breaths of air, then massaging her heart. Despite his emotions he went about the task of reviving the girl with a cold routine that he knew well. It was part of his training as a medical doctor.

It was perhaps three minutes after her rescue by him before she began to show the first sign of her return to life. One then both eyes began to dilate in the bright sun. Then the blueness of her skin and lips began to fade.

Max registered a pulse, then a slow but monotonic increase in her blood pressure. Then she coughed. He stopped the CPR and held her in one arm while slowly tapping her face with his other hand.

“Come on little one ...” She opened her eyes. “Come back to life.” She looked at him and then let out a paroxysm of coughing. He lifted her out of the water and onto the river bank. She was out of danger.

Then he proceeded to remove her envirosuit with an efficacy that only one who was intimately familiar with the technology might have. She was cold. He dried her and then held her close to his body, wrapped her in his cloak to keep her warm.

She looked up at him and smiled but didn’t say anything. It was B”jabber. Cynthia 123 was crying.

He wiped the tears from her eyes. “I have been waiting for you ...” He hugged her. “I have been waiting for you for five years. I am your father.”

With all her strength she hugged him back but did not say a thing. “Close your eyes and sleep for a while.”

She closed her eyes and slept. She had come back to life, and she was safe. And for once ... Max remained perfectly silent.

## **Epilogue - They Have Been Reunited**

They had been reunited, Cynthia 123 and her father. Together they would set their world back upright.

Unbeknownst to both of them, the Medibots had brought into being a new life, conceived immaculately without human participation.

The baby would be a perfect copy of her mother.

What becomes of Cynthia123 and her baby in the years ahead is the next instalment in our saga

– the Realm of One.

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